



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

For Information

EUROPEAN
ASSOCIATION FOR THE
EDUCATION OF ADULTS
(EAEA)

Transparency register
no. 3334854676-12

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Permeability and flexibility in ALE to improve outreach and spark motivation

EAEA's Statement
December 2024

The latest Eurostat statistics show that adult learners are seven times more likely to participate in non-formal than in formal education (with a percentage of 44% for non-formal education against 6.3% for the formal) [1]. Non-formal programmes are usually shorter, but also more flexible and easier to combine with work, care work and other commitments. Nonetheless, we are still experiencing barriers that are slowing or blocking progress in participation in adult learning and education (ALE) and its permeability [2]. Common barriers can be characterised as follows:

- Difficulties in **reaching** learners;
- **Inflexibility** of educational pathways;
- Lack of **motivation** of the learners.

Effective outreach equals inclusion and accessibility

By the term **outreach**, we mean the inclusion of target groups in the educational process, from the design of the pathway to its delivery, to create programmes aligned with the needs of the adults. This is a basic principle of inclusive education in ALE which is not only important for individual learners, but also for the society in which we live, as it helps to combat discrimination and promote diversity. However, this principle is still too often neglected in educational processes, with the result that marginalised communities and vulnerable groups find it difficult or impossible to access educational opportunities. This is because outreach can be perceived as patronising: 'We from the inside, who know, reach out to those who do not know' [3].



Co-funded by
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Not all outreach work is, therefore, created equal - effective, learner-centred outreach requires a well-developed structure and eco-system, including partnerships with social and public services, learning guidance, and other stakeholders, especially NGOs and CSOs.

Effective outreach is also mentioned in the European Commission's Upskilling Pathways as the first step to implement the initiative that aims to lead adults into learning and guide them through the learning process. Yet, it does not seem to be enough. As Draghi's report on **The future of European competitiveness** [4] argues, the reason behind the undersupply of skills in Europe can be found in the decline of traditional education and training systems. This is a point that is underlined also by the OECD's PISA scores: while educational attainments in formal education are dominated by Asian countries, Europe is experiencing an unprecedented decline. This also has an impact on adult skills: the latest results of the OECD's PIAAC study show that 1 in 5 adults do not have sufficient basic literacy skills.

Furthermore, the gap between the "low performers" and "high performers" is increasing, with the "low performers" scoring lower and the "high performers" scoring higher than in the previous PIAAC study ten years earlier.

At the same time, participation in ALE in 2022 has been increasing slowly since 2016 (+ 3.0 percentage points) reaching 47% of learners taking part in training [5]. However, to achieve the target set by the **2020 European Skills Agenda** [6] of having at least 60% of adults participating in training every year, more needs to be done. The number of participating adults alone is not a good indicator of the wealth and depth of competences that adults acquire: to ensure good quality in ALE, structural support for the sector and sufficient operational funding are needed to enable the development and maintenance of provision structures.

At the level of ALE providers, planning strategies for outreach and further guidance plays a central role. It helps to create a dialogue between educators and other ALE professionals, target groups and stakeholders by emphasising mutual respect so that outreach is experienced not as patronising but as empowering.

[1] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Adult_learning_-_participants

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Adult_learning_statistics#:~:text=Highlights&text=In%202022%2C%2047%20%25%20of%20adults,in%20the%20last%2012%20months.&text=In%20the%20EU%2C%2014%20%25%20of, recent%20learning%20experience%20in%202023.&text=In%202022%2C%2064%20%25%20of%20adults,informal%20learning%20in%20the%20EU.

[3] Guidelines for Trainers and Management Staff in Adult Education, ImplOED 2016

[4] https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en

[5] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Adult_learning_-_participants#:~:text=article%20update%3A%202030-,Highlights,3%20percentage%20points%20from%202016.

[6] https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda_en

[6] https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda_en

Good Practice 1

Mannheim Adult Education Centre

✓ *Comprehensive outreach strategy*

In the project **Migrants teach migrants** well-integrated migrant women were trained to become mentors and to support trainers in German language courses for new immigrants. The mentors got trained in presentation and moderation techniques and got training from experts on certain fields (such as health, food, education), learned to prepare lesson plans and exercises. Subsequently, they passed on the acquired knowledge to participants in integration courses. Step by step, the mentors learned to take over responsibilities so that towards the end, project coordinators and mentors started working on the same level.

After the three year project finished, the mentors were involved in developing the concept for an evening course for the target group of migrants with little language skills in German/Turkish, German/Arabic and German/Russian. Furthermore, the mentors worked on a concept for a course for elderly migrants and for a course on the recognition of foreign qualifications. They had come to be seen as experts by the staff of the education provider who realized that the skills the mentors had acquired would be beneficial to new learners, the provider and the mentors themselves. [7]

Flexibility as a response to new and ongoing challenges

Education has been facing immense challenges in the last few years due to the global socio-political context such as the COVID pandemic, the economic and climate crises, demographic change, the advent of AI and, partly related to this, changes in democratic behaviour and participation. In this world of rapid change, it is of crucial importance to build flexibility into ALE pathways: on the one hand to keep pace with the inevitable changes, but on the other hand also to empower adults to work proactively on solutions.

Flexibility can be a key solution to many of the problems arising from these rapid changes. However, EAEA emphasises that flexibility in ALE must be learner-centred. Flexibility should not be a convenient way out of the current teacher and educator shortage, for example by 'flexibly' combining learning groups or shifting learning opportunities from face-to-face to hybrid or completely online courses. The flexibility of the workforce, which is often mentioned and desired at the political level, also has little to do with flexibility in the sense of ALE. The former type of flexibility is usually understood as a requirement of the labour market for workers to be able to adapt quickly in terms of their place and field of work. While ALE can prepare adults for this, 'true' flexibility means that learners themselves can discover and develop their learning pathways, and that these are feasible in terms of time commitment, funding, and compatibility with work, family and care responsibilities (see Box 2 for good practices on flexibility).

However, new technologies can support flexible learning paths if they are developed and implemented with a **focus on learner-centredness** (see Good Practice 2). They include teaching methods that incorporate the use of open educational resources (OER) and massive open online courses (MOOCs).

The internet has become the largest platform for open educational resources (OER) and can offer convenient opportunities for self-learning, especially for experienced learners, supported by collaborative tools for knowledge generation and sharing. The role of educators is changing from that of knowledge transmitters to learning guides.

At the same time, it must be emphasised that, while new technologies can make learning more accessible for some target groups, this is mainly the case for those who already have a comparatively high level of education. One in two Europeans still has little or no digital skills and can not take advantage of these opportunities or only to a limited extent.

Good Practice 2

Go! Academy

✓Flexible pathways

The learning platform GO! Academy offers learners the possibility to engage with courses in a very flexible way allowing them to follow their own pace. Lessons are structured in such a way that learners can take them at any time of the day (daytime, night-time and weekend) or to start the training at any time of the school year.

This blend of technology and flexibility allows the learners to create a personalized path, simultaneously integrated with a combination of vocational training and Dutch as a second language, general training and/or literacy modules.

The courses are also available offline and the platform offers the possibility to have dual learning opportunities through internships

The platform offers Innovative outreach activities via local service centres, libraries, in detention centres. [8]

More flexible learning pathways also require a **diversification of learning programmes**, for example, shorter learning programmes with micro-credentials and technology-supported learning programmes [9]. On the other hand, networking between ALE providers and greater collaboration in the provision of learning programmes must also take place to avoid a fragmentation of learning opportunities and such a strong individualisation of learning that learners end up travelling their respective educational paths in isolation from one another.

The role of **recognition and validation of prior learning and competences** becomes all the more important: these offers must be freely and easily accessible and seamlessly linked to suitable educational offers to enable the flow from outreach to participation in ALE and further education opportunities.

[8] <https://www.goacademy.be/>

[9] <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/flexible-learning-pathways-more-relevant-future-all>

Good Practice 3

Cork Education and Training Board (CETB)

✓ *Person-Centred Learning Pathways in Literacy Services for a Growing Cohort of Young Male Early School Leavers Seeking Apprenticeships*

This initiative was developed by an Education and Training (FET) Guidance Counsellor in conjunction with colleagues from the FET Literacy and Education Services, in direct response to a regional problem, supporting young male school leavers who had passed fewer than the required five subjects in their Junior Certificate to register as apprentices.

For this target group, individual learning pathways were developed, which began with a very precise examination of their competences and qualifications. Based on this, a learning programme was built. Online learning modules were also included in the respective individual programme, but with close supervision by the FET Guidance Counsellor, so that immediate action could be taken in the event of learning issues. The learning programmes were adapted to the requirements of the working hours and discussed with the learners' respective employers.

The sense of achievement gained from learning also led to success in the search for an apprenticeship: the learners were taken on as apprentices at the end of the programme and shared this positive outcome with their peers, one of them noting "there are many more young lads like me out there". [10]

In this regard, **National Quality Frameworks (NQFs)** can ensure quality and relevance of flexible learning pathways and prevent the negative impact of learning fragmentation. NQFs are reference points to ensure that different levels and types of learning programmes can be vertically and horizontally connected under common quality frameworks and standards [11]. The following gives an example of the implementation of NQFs with the inclusion of new providers and technology (see box 3).

Good Practice 4

AONTAS - National Adult Learning Organisation

✓ *Innovative Approach to Engaging Learners with Disabilities*

The initiative called My Voice, My Choice was developed by Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board with support from South East Technological University.

The initiative is an inclusive approach to engaging learners with intellectual disabilities in Higher Education (HE). The learners were registered to Further Education and Training (FET) programmes at Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Levels 2 and 3.

My Voice, My Choice was developed around two existing QQI modules: Using Technology and Personal Decision-Making to advocate for their own needs. This is a case study which reflects the impact of adult learning on the learner. In their feedback learners expressed pride in taking part and their sense of belonging in the college environment. The tutors adopted a universal design for learning approach, engaging the learners in every step of the designing. This involved the use of Google Classroom, WhatsApp, Mentimeter, Inclusion Ireland Self Advocate YouTube resources, and Flipgrid. [12]

[10] https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Adult-Learner-Journal/ALJ2024/AontasTheAdultLearner2024_web.pdf

[11] <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/flexible-learning-pathways-more-relevant-future-all>

[12] https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Adult-Learner-Journal/ALJ2024/AontasTheAdultLearner2024_web.pdf

Motivation requires concrete incentives

Motivation in learners depends on many factors: from the opportunities the workplace offers for taking part in learning opportunities (both workplace-related and non-workplace-related), to previous (dis)satisfying learning experiences in formal and non-formal contexts, family situations, governmental support and finally intrinsic motivation for learning. Regardless of the individual case, the promotion of flexible and engaging teaching and learning methods is a decisive factor in fostering motivation for learning. The data supports this: low-skilled adults whose earlier experience in education has been negative are more likely to be motivated by training that is more practical and engaging [13]. This is why a key role is played by formal education: the very first experiences that learners have are those that will shape their attitude and motivation towards learning in the future.

Particularly for work-related learning, adults need a connection between their learning and the outcome [14]. Earning ‘badges’ or (other) unofficial certificates at the end of a training course is not enough to create motivation. Learners need to have concrete outcomes such as financial gain or promotion at work to overcome the barriers that prevent them from starting to learn in the first place [15]. But here, too, **learning must be relevant** to generate interest. If learning is only undertaken because of external incentives, e.g. a possibly higher salary, this does not necessarily lead to higher intrinsic motivation, but can, on the contrary, lead to an inner ‘resistance to further education’ in which learning is experienced as an obligation rather than something that can bring joy. Some countries have started adopting good practices to engage low-skilled workers in training that is tailored to their initial skill level, needs and experience (see boxes 4 and 5 for the example).

However, there are also many other reasons for participating in learning. **Interest in a particular area - or simply the joy of it** - is usually the deciding factor, and this is also where the great strength of non-formal ALE lies. Courses that are sometimes considered ‘leisure courses’, such as health and cooking courses, handicrafts, woodwork, etc., take place in ALE centres which typically offer a wide range of different programmes. A course that is taken out of interest and uses engaging methods will reinforce interest and also show the learner what they are capable of (in ALE jargon, these are often called “low-threshold learning opportunities” as they offer an easy entry into ALE). This increases intrinsic motivation to learn, which, in turn, increases the chances that this person will participate in other learning offers later on.

[13] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Adult_learning_statistics#:~:text=Highlights&text=In%202022%2C%2047%20%25%20of%20adults,in%20the%20last%2012%20months.&text=In%20the%20EU%2C%2014%20%25%20of,recent%20learning%20experience%20in%202023.&text=In%202022%2C%2064%20%25%20of%20adults,informal%20learning%20in%20the%20EU .[14] <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/flexible-learning-pathways-more-relevant-future-all> [14] OECD (2019[12]), “Getting Skills Right Engaging low-skilled adults in learning”, <https://www.oecd.org/employment/emp/engaginglow-skilled-adults-2019.pdf> . Good practices [15] <https://www.charlestonsouthern.edu/blog/adult-learners-motivations-for-intellectual-growth/>

The actual outcomes of learning do not always match or are not limited to the expected outcomes. What learners in ALE get is much more: the discovery of new skills and competences, social interaction and inclusion, more self-confidence, better health, etc. (see the results of the BeLL study) [16].

Good Practice 5

FEDERACIÓN ESPAÑOLA DE UNIVERSIDADES POPULARES

✓ *Matching motivation with outcome*

The Erasmus MUPYME Project, coordinated by the Spanish Federation of Popular Universities (FEUP) since 2015, seeks to promote awareness of which skills of housewives are transferable to the business economy and how best to enhance them.

The initiative, presented under the title 'Employment and women in the 21st century in Europe: from the household economy to an SME-type economy', outlines a training itinerary conducted through a comparative research of 8 participating partner countries, with the housewives and with successful professional women as managers of SMEs.

The general objectives of MUPYME are to enable housewives to go from being household managers to being managers of SMEs or micro-SMEs. On the other hand, the initiative also aims to increase the qualification of the instructors of the organizations in charge of adult education, generating a training program tailored to the target group in order to have a higher impact on further employment possibilities, enhancing also the motivation and skills of the target group. [17]

Good Practice 6

ETKA ANDRAS

✓ *Recognition in promoting adult learning*

The **Estonian Adult Education Recognition Contest** is an initiative born to promote lifelong learning and encourage adults to return to education.

The contest is held annually and seeks candidates in four categories: Adult Learner of the Year, Adult Educator of the Year, Learning Deed of the Year, and Learning-Friendly Organization of the Year.

Each county selects outstanding candidates in each category and submits them to a national committee, which then chooses the national winners. In the framework of the Adult Learners' Week, county-level winners are recognized locally, with short interviews shared through local media. National winners are celebrated at a special broadcasted event.

The winners of the contest understand their role as advocates of adult education and role models and they have been able to infect their family members, colleagues, friends and acquaintances with the germ of learning.

The number of nominees has grown every year, reaching nearly 400 per year. This shows that the recognition has found an increasing resonance in the society.

[16] <https://eaea.org/our-work/projects3/benefits-of-lifelong-learning/>

[17] <https://feup.org/web/2017/07/10/unas-300-participantes-de-ocho-paises-europeos-asisten-al-seminario-mupyme-mujer-y-empresa/>

[18] <https://hm.ee/en/news/promoters-adult-education-estonia-gained-international-recognition>

Conclusions

To implement flexible learning pathways, we need to:

- Ensure that **outreach is inclusive and comprehensive** of the wider learning eco-system;
- Connect flexibility to **learner-centredness**, i.e. ensure that the flexibility is in the favour of the learners' interests;
- **Diversify learning opportunities** while avoiding fragmentation of the offers and isolation of individual learners from each other, and while promoting ALE-driven quality assurance;
- Accessible **systems for recognition and validation** of prior learning and competences;
- Promote intrinsic **motivation** in learning by making it relevant and enjoyable.

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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