



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

For Information

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION
FOR THE EDUCATION OF
ADULTS (EAEA)

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A Union of Skills that puts the needs and ambitions of adult learners at the centre

EAEA's Statement
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Key Recommendations

- Develop initiatives that highlight the importance of non-formal education in ALE, reskilling and upskilling.
- Consider well-being, health, citizenship and transversal skills as cornerstones for responsive, prepared and motivated citizens.
- Increase of public funding for ALE.

The new European Commission, led by Ursula von der Leyen, proposes a Union of Skills as part of its ambitious 100-day plan. The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) represents the European non-formal adult learning and education sector with thousands of providers and millions of learners. We welcome this initiative but stress that skills must be understood holistically - supporting individuals, communities, and society, not just the labour market.

Non-formal learning is essential for reinforcing the European social market model

Skills for work and life are intertwined. In addition to professional, digital, and green skills, adults need basic and life skills, including critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving capacities, financial literacy, and citizenship skills. **Adult Learning and Education (ALE) provides important spaces for dialogue, mutual learning and cohesion. ALE fosters sustainability, social inclusion, and community development, belongs to a Union of Skills that aims to reinforce Europe and its social market model by building on its citizens and their competences.**

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Skills provided in non-formal learning are central not only for the labour markets in Europe, but for the development of the European project itself.

According to the guidelines of the ‘Competitiveness Compass’, social policy is of central importance in shaping a competitive Europe; at the same time, the world of work is in a constant state of flux, requiring the ability to adapt. It is for this very reason that it is **fundamental to motivate adult learners to pursue their inclinations and talents, following the European humanistic core values approach of citizens as subjects and not objects of the labour market.** And in doing so, going beyond the short-term demands of the labour market: citizens who feel motivated and supported in their learning pathways, whatever these may be, will be more responsive citizens, healthier, and better prepared in times of uncertainty.

As highlighted in Draghi's report ‘The future of European competitiveness’, we should not prioritise certain skills if it means neglecting others. **Among the skills that Draghi identifies as fundamental for jobs are transversal skills. The Union of Skills must emphasise the importance of these skills,** not least as these skills are identified as the key skills 2025 in the latest WEF report on the future of jobs. Quality assurance in ALE helps to ensure that adults can acquire a wide range of skills, from life skills to skills for the labour market, and that they can also develop an awareness of the links between and relevance of different skills for their personal and professional lives.

Sustainable funding and structural support needed to increase motivation for and participation in adult learning

EAEA stresses the essential role of ALE in reaching new learners and providing flexible learning pathways for all through guidance and validation of prior learning. Non-formal ALE must be recognised as a key education sector that empowers learners by making learning accessible and enjoyable through low-threshold learning offers, thus increasing intrinsic motivation for learning. To achieve this, EAEA calls for an increase in financial and structural resources, including governance mechanisms, for non-formal ALE and emphasises the need for stable public funding, especially for smaller ALE providers and civil society-led learning provision that aims to include groups furthest removed from learning.

With appropriate support, the Union of Skills has the potential to significantly increase participation in adult learning to 60% by 2030. However, EAEA insists that all adults, including those who are not/no longer in employment, older people, people with disabilities, people with parenting and caregiving responsibilities, are included in the European strategies, emphasising the importance of lifelong learning for social inclusion, wellbeing, and active and healthy ageing.

To reach a higher participation in ALE by 2030, it must be recognised that it is not enough to strengthen the demand for ALE, for instance through Individual Learning Accounts: the supply side must also be strengthened to ensure excellent quality and infrastructures adapted to the higher demand. This cannot be achieved through the current project-based model of ALE and requires fundamental reforms of the legal framework, public funding and taxation systems, and governance structures.

Public funding for ALE needs to increase substantially from the current 0,1% of GDP, and be strengthened by consistent investments by private sector actors, including employers. Higher national and regional budgets for ALE are essential for implementing instruments that help adults reconcile learning with care duties, work, and other high priorities. More emphasis also needs to be put on the financing of inclusion measures for adults furthest removed from learning, such as outreach and guidance measures.

Put the needs of adult learners at the centre!

One size does not fit all when it comes to education: **the needs of adult learners need to be put at the centre of policymaking and implementation of education programmes to promote engagement in learning and achieve high retention rates.** This includes support such as childcare during course times, flexible course attendance, evening courses in addition to daytime courses, hybrid and online learning, modular programmes, and the possibility to attend courses provided by education providers in other European countries to ensure a close match to language skills and learning needs. Micro-credentials can help promote flexible learning pathways: **this requires recognising non-formal ALE providers as suppliers of high-quality learning offers** and as issuers of micro-credentials, and fostering partnerships between higher education, VET, and non-formal ALE.

To allow people to exercise the freedom of education in Europe (see also Letta's proposal for a Fifth Freedom) and find learning opportunities closest matching to their needs, **a directive on a right to paid transnational educational leave in Europe and a flexibilisation of education systems in Europe are needed.** This must include permeability of education sectors, accessible measures for validation of prior learning and guidance to potential learning opportunities, as well as learning mobility for all adult learners, also those in non-formal ALE.

Initial and continuing training for adult educators

To ensure high-quality learning provision, adult educators and trainers must have the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to integrate this into educational content and teaching methods. There are still significant differences in Europe between the initial and continuing training of teachers and educators in formal education and those in non-formal ALE: most European countries do not have structured initial and continuing training programmes for adult educators. This results in precarious working conditions and large differences in methods, and formal school approaches tend to not being effective when it comes to adult learners.[1]

EAEA, therefore, calls for **better initial and continuous training opportunities for adult educators as well as better working conditions by promoting structural support to the sector**, recognising that stronger ALE structures are essential for the provision of inclusive, high-quality learning opportunities for all adults.

We welcome the Commission's new initiatives, such as the STEM Education Strategic Plan, a Basic Skills Action Plan and a European Strategy for Vocational Education and Training, as well as the focus on strengthening the European University alliances. However, in order to achieve the objectives set out in the Competitiveness Compass and the priorities of the work programme, we ask the Commission to provide additional tools or reinforcement to commit equally to adult learning and to truly embrace the narrative of leaving no one behind.

Citizenship and science education for a more open and cohesive society

EAEA also calls for a **stronger focus on science, citizenship and democracy education and a strengthening of intersectional approaches to combat misinformation, xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and gender-based discrimination as well as all other kinds of discrimination** and to promote active citizenship and democratic engagement. Especially in view of the political polarisation trends and increasingly difficult framework conditions for civic participation in many European countries, citizenship and democracy education must be recognised as central components of ALE and promoted accordingly in order to foster a more open and cohesive society.

The European Commission's 2025 work programme emphasised the need to protect our values and democracy. Non-formal adult education plays a key role in spreading these values, especially among adult learners with lower basic and life skills who may feel even more lost in this time of uncertainty because they lack the tools to understand and deal with the complexities of the reality in which we live. EAEA asks the Union of Skills to consider **non-formal adult education as a cornerstone for spreading citizenship and democracy skills**. Without the right tools and knowledge, there is a high risk that parts of our adult society will fall behind.

Central focus on the well-being of learners and workers

Another **central focus must be placed on well-being and mental health**: the professional, social and familial demands on adults are becoming ever greater. According to numerous studies, the risk and the cases of burnout and other stress-related diseases are rising across Europe. At the same time, the economy is demanding a higher level of professional involvement from the so-called "inactive" and long-term unemployed, many of whom suffer from mental and physical health problems.

Promoting well-being at work and in personal life must therefore become a political priority to enable people to lead healthy, happy and self-determined lives. Non-formal ALE offers a wide range of programmes for this purpose, for example in the areas of health, arts and cultural education. At the same time, by bringing together people from different age groups and walks of life, ALE promotes social integration, having a positive impact on well-being.

[1] <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40955-024-00283-z>

Policy coherence across all levels of policy-making and inclusion of civil society

Finally, EAEA advocates for a **Union of Skills that is coherent with other policy agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals**, and recognises ALE as a transversal agenda that is crucial to all other policy areas. This requires stronger inter- and intra-government cooperation at the regional, national, and European levels. Civil society in ALE, representing learners, educators, and providers, must be involved in all areas of governance to ensure that policies and structures put the needs and interests of adult learners at the centre.

We recognise that education is not an exclusive matter for the European Union, but more can be done to support Member States in their responsibilities for a happy, motivated, healthy, prepared and responsive population, recognising that before they are workers and learners, adults are human beings with dreams and aspirations to fulfil their lives in a society open to their needs.

Recommendations:

- Develop initiatives that highlight the importance of non-formal education in ALE, reskilling and upskilling, not only job related.
- Consider well-being, health and citizenship and transversal skills as cornerstones for responsive, prepared and motivated citizens.
- Increase of public funding for ALE allowing the creation of high-quality education and training programs.
- Improve the coordination at the European and national level, avoiding uncoordinated and ineffective policies and squandering of money.
- Provide better working conditions to adult educators along with adequate resources, competitive salary and career opportunities to upskill.

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

