



Flexible Learning Pathways: Where are we in ALE?

Lessons learnt from EAEA's 2025 Annual Theme

FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

Authors: Charlotte Ede and Raffaella Kihrer

Publisher: European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)

Year of publication: 2025

Layout and Editing: European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA);
Marina Sakač Hadžić

Photographs: EAEA. All individuals depicted in these photographs have provided their explicit consent for the images to be taken and used for EAEA publications. The collection and use of these images are carried out in full compliance with the applicable requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

This publication is produced with the financial support of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

MINISTRY OF
EDUCATION AND CULTURE
FINLAND



Co-funded by
the European Union

Table of contents

Introduction	4
2025	5
Event highlight: EU and Adult Learning - 30 years of partnership in policy and programmes	6
Activity highlight: EAEA Annual Conference on Flexible Learning Pathways	7
Impact at a glance	8
What is a Flexible Learning Pathway?	9
Why are Flexible Learning Pathways in adult learning and education important?	12
Overcoming barriers to adult learning through Flexible Learning Pathways	13
What does flexibility in ALE look like? EAEA's Key findings	20
Recommendations for avenues for further development of Flexible Learning Pathways in ALE	21
Final reflections: Towards resilience & community building	27
Bibliography	28

Introduction

ALE plays a crucial role in supporting adults to navigate changing work environments, develop new skills, and pursue personal growth. The 2021 Council Resolution on a new European Agenda for Adult Learning (2021–2030) recognises Flexible Learning Pathways as a vital tool for increasing participation in Adult Learning and Education (ALE). By responding to learners’ diverse circumstances, needs, and aspirations, ALE enables individuals to fully engage in learning at any stage of life.

Supporting this vision, EAEA worked in 2025 on the annual theme “Flexible Learning Pathways”. The theme guided the work of EAEA throughout the year, including the annual conference held in Leipzig in June 2025, which welcomed more than 150 participants. EAEA supports Flexible Learning Pathways that are learner-centred by design. Such pathways offer adults the freedom to choose when, where, and how they learn, accommodating work schedules, family responsibilities, and life commitments. These pathways go beyond traditional forms of education, including modular courses, non-formal programmes, online and blended learning, and recognition of prior learning. They empower learners to reskill, upskill, or explore new interests while fostering inclusion, motivation, and lifelong engagement with learning.

By concentrating on Flexible Learning Pathways, EAEA spotlighted innovative practices that put learners at the centre, showing how adaptable and inclusive approaches can transform learning experiences. This paper presents the rationale behind the 2025 theme and highlights examples from across the EAEA network and beyond, illustrating how flexible learning can make lifelong learning a reality for all adults.

2025



December

Country Reports publication



EU and ALE 30 years of partnership



October

ABC of ALE Training with a workshop on designing flexible learning pathways with learners



September

Launch of Season 3 of the Beyond Learning Podcast on Reimagining Possibilities



July

Press release on Disability Awareness Day, Flexibility and ALE

FLEXIBLE LEARNING

PATHWAYS



June

EAEA General Assembly and Annual Conference with over 150 participants and 10 parallel workshops on FLP



March

Statement: "A union of skills that puts the needs and ambitions of adult learners at the centre"



January

Launch of the annual theme

Event highlight: EU and Adult Learning - 30 years of partnership in policy and programmes

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) and GO! (Gemeenschapsonderwijs) organised a high-level celebratory event EU and Adult Learning - 30 years of partnership in policy and programmes in Brussels on December 10, 2025. The event marked three decades of adult learning and education (ALE) in EU policy and 25 years since the launch of the Grundtvig programme. Keynote speeches by **Vanessa Debiais-Sainton**, Member of the Cabinet of Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu, and **Alan Smith**, member of the team that created Erasmus and the first EU Coordinator of Grundtvig, outlined the inspirations behind today's Erasmus+ programme and the role of adult learning in it. It was also an opportunity to launch EAEA's 2024/25 [Country Reports](#), outlining the state of play in 12 EAEA Member countries.

The event, attended by over 100 people, was opened by MEP **Brigitte van den Berg** (Renew) and **Lauri Tuomi**, EAEA president and KVS CEO. During the panel discussion on the future of ALE, CSOs and educator representatives explored the different visions of what's to come. The speakers included: MEP **Cynthia Ní Mhurchú**, Renew; **Tanja Hristova**, Mayor of Gabrovo Municipality, First Vice-Chair SEDEC Commission, European Committee of the Regions; **Elisa Gambardella**, President of Lifelong Learning Platform; **Diter Den Baes**, General Director of GO! school group Xplora and **Gustav Fridolin**, former Swedish Minister of Education, current EAEA Board member and adult educator. The event was closed by MEP **Sirpa Pietikäinen** (EPP).

Through the discussions, it became clear that when we look ahead, adult learning is no longer a single standalone project. It has the power to be a transformative policy, providing equal opportunities for all and reshaping communities and the lives in them. Through reconnecting with former colleagues and stakeholders, as well as the new connections made, what stood out was the need to stay strong in the ALE community, to support one another and to work for the future of ALE in European policy that we shape together.



The year 2025 was a celebration of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) with a particular focus on the flexibility that allows learning to adapt to the realities of adult life, culminating in our 30 years of ALE celebratory event in December 2025. This year highlighted how ALE, when designed to be adaptable and learner-centred, can empower individuals and communities alike.

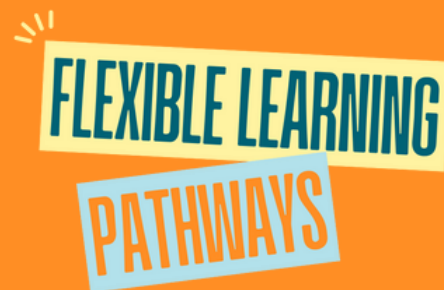
Activity highlight: EAEA Annual Conference on Flexible Learning Pathways

The 2025 Annual Conference was organised under the theme of Flexible Learning Pathways ([Key results 2025](#)), by EAEA and in cooperation with DVV International and VHS Leipzig, Germany. Over 150 participants representing 22 countries met and discussed non-formal education in Leipzig. The event lasted two days and hosted two keynote speeches, a panel discussion and nine parallel workshops. The workshops involved implementation from the EAEA secretariat as well as 7 EAEA members and explored the following topics:

1. Promoting inclusion through Erasmus+: Flexible pathways and mobility in ALE
2. Strategic leadership in times of rapid change
3. The two faces of transitions
4. Good policy communication for accessible learning pathways
5. Flexible learning pathways and gender
6. Learner agency and action: Addressing strategies for fostering self-determination and collective action in ALE
7. Digital pathways: Supporting literacy and assisting learning
8. Collaborative learning and community-building: Creating pathways that connect learners with community resources
9. Leading inclusion, empowering adults through flexible learning pathways in a changing world

“In several discussions, we reflected on how we are living in strange, turbulent times – and how flexible learning is essential to ensure all adults can participate fully in society,” said EAEA’s newly elected Board President Lauri Tuomi from the Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation at the closing.

Impact at a glance 2025



150+

Annual Event
participants in Leipzig



12+

Activities under the theme



30

Members initiatives highlighted

Policy & Advocacy

12,000+

Engagement with our policy statements

3

Policy review webinars

12

New country reports

Communication

78,000+

Website visits

+11%

Social media followers

Capacity-building & training

5

Online and in-person training
courses organised by EAEA

75

Training participants

63%

Female participation in training

Outreach & stakeholder engagement

8

New EAEA members

1

New partnership as a Pact for Skills
Member (European Commission initiative)

7

Episodes published on the **Beyond
Learning Podcast**, with a focus on
Reimagining Possibilities

What is a Flexible Learning Pathway?

Flexible Learning Pathways allow learners to move within and across their educational and training choices – meaning that learners can adapt their pathways to suit their desires and interests (CEDEFOP, 2024). Flexible Learning Pathways are common to find in Higher Education settings, where universities are increasingly recognising the value of lifelong learning in the sector (Reinmean, 2023). For example, Leiden University’s webpage dedicated to Flexible Learning Pathways states:

The ambition to have flexible learning pathways is about creating possibilities to improve the content and form of students’ learning process, and to link learning to students’ needs. Students who have access to a flexible range of learning pathways can align their university career with their own personal learning objectives, always benefiting from their teachers’ guidance.

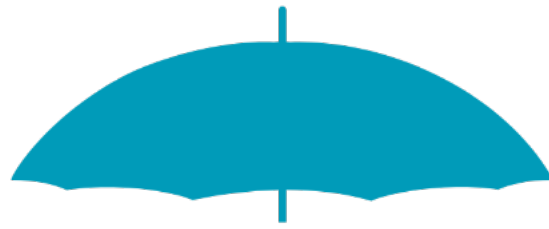
(Leiden University, Unknown)

Aligning with personal objectives is a key factor in Flexible Learning Pathways, where “flexibility” refers to the learner’s ability to shape their learning opportunities. Martin & Godonoga, in their research paper “SDG 4 - Policies for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education”, consider that Flexible Learning Pathways involve both the permeability of the education system to be entered and re-entered at various points in a learner’s life, but also “recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and formal education”.

This definition brings to light the various aspects that influence “how flexible” a learning pathway in adult learning and education is. Put shortly:

Flexible Learning Pathways are an umbrella concept that involves multiple well-designed learning pathways that meet the needs of diverse students, with multiple entry points and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and nonformal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through nonformal and informal education.
(UNEVOC, 2024)

One of the main goals of EAEA’s annual theme on Flexible Learning Pathways in 2025 was to **explore the definition of flexible learning pathways in practice in adult education**. Our findings from the year show that **flexibility is expressed differently across the sector**, with the common theme that the needs of the learners are at the centre of designing adaptable learning opportunities.



Flexible Learning Pathways

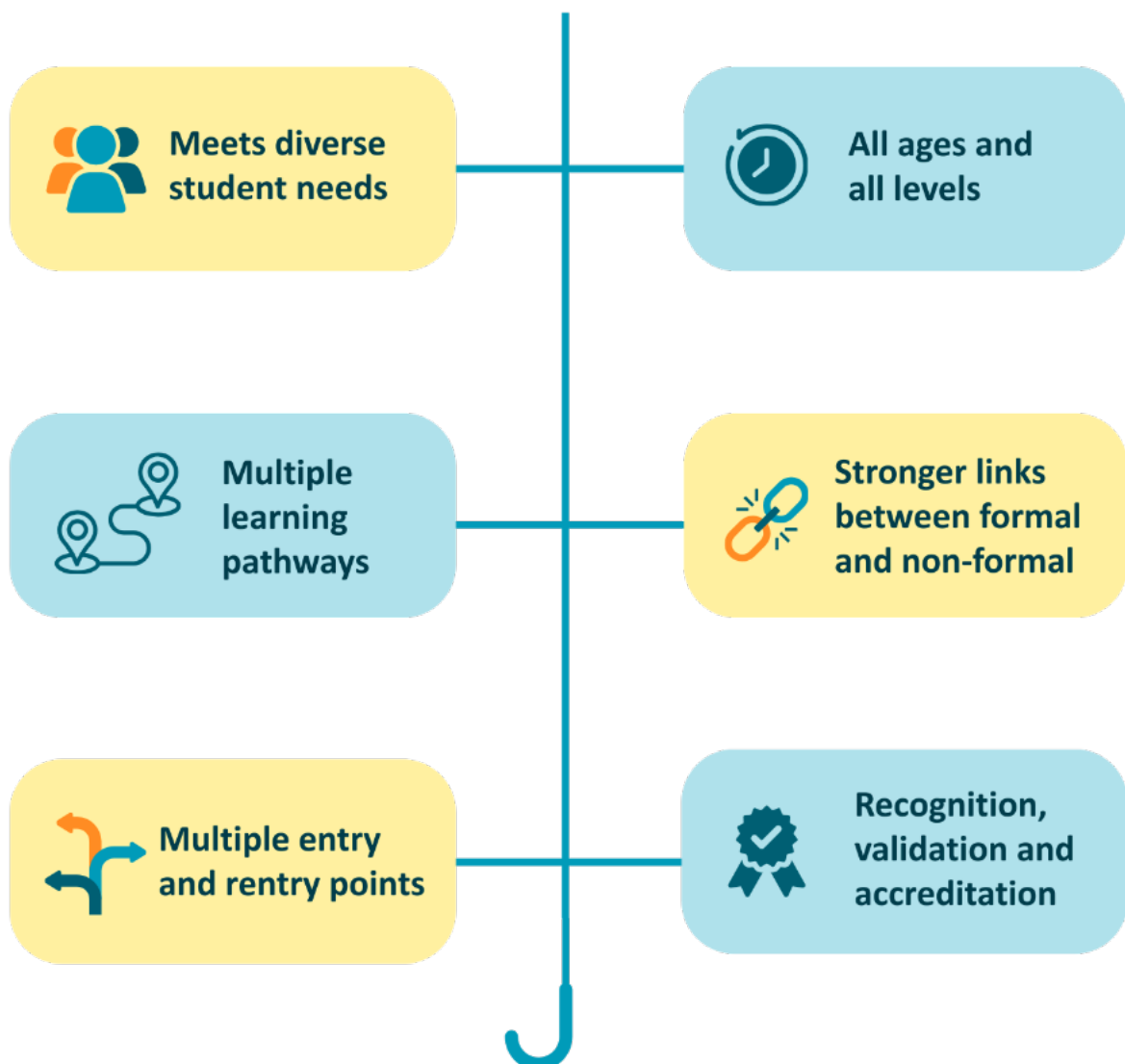


Figure 2: What is a Flexible Learning Pathway?
Owner: EAEA

Good Practice of Flexible Learning Pathways: Meath Partnership, Ireland

Basic Digital Skills Training at Meath Partnership, Ireland: Meath Partnership (www.meathpartnership.ie) are delivering basic Digital Skills Training as part of their Department of Communication, Climate Action and Environment 'Getting Citizens Online' programme. They have delivered classes to numerous groups in the Meath/Cavan/Louth area. The classes are free and are for 10 hours of training which can be delivered to suit each groups specific requirements. It covers introduction to the Internet, email, websites, accessing online government services, online banking and use of apps etc. Meath Partnership have found with GAA clubs that their members also require training on the use of GAA/Sports Apps/Twitter etc. Training is provided on both laptops and mobile devices i.e. iPads, iPhones, Smartphones, Tablets .

The digital skills classes welcome older individuals in rural areas, ensuring that all venues are accessible in wheelchairs and public transport. They check with learners about the best times for classes. During the sessions, the adults are asked individually what they would like to learn – for example, using the internet for online grocery delivery. They are then accompanied by volunteer teachers who show them how to be independent with this skill. During the middle of the class, learners have the chance to have a cup of tea and exchange on what they have learnt, and ask others for advice. The initiative serves a dual purpose to upskill older adults, but also to combat social exclusion.



“I never thought about it, but in my community digital classes, we are really flexible. We offer 1:1 sessions for older individuals to learn the digital skills they would like and we tailor the content to their needs”

- Adult educator from Ireland,
ABC of ALE 2025 training participant

Why are Flexible Learning Pathways in adult learning and education important?

Many studies have looked at the options for Flexible Learning Pathways in higher education, but few in adult learning and education. A major exception to this is the OECD 2023 report “Flexible adult learning provision: What it is, why it matters”. The paper outlines the key factors for flexibility, and underpins that:

Adult learning systems need to provide a range of flexible learning options that recognise the constraints of people who are working, have family or other responsibilities and are trying to improve their skills at the same time.

(OECD, 2023)

ALE is uniquely marked by the broad range of the target group– when we speak about adults, we include all adults, from the age of 16 to 18 years in most countries to older citizens. The realities of who an adult learner is will greatly vary according to specific national and local contexts – where countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, Hungary and Germany have a higher proportion of learners compared to other EU countries (AES, 2024). Much as the nature of our economies and societies is in constant adaptation, so too are the needs of adult learning and education to be reactive, adaptive and truly transformative (UNESCO 2021b, pp. 114–115, Cited in Benavot, Hoppers, Lockhart, & Hinzen, 2022).

In this way, adult learning and education systems must be flexible to be inclusive to different learners, offering further opportunities for growth, self-development and potential in the labour market, but also for adults outside of or no longer active in the labour market. **True flexibility is centred on the interests of the learners**, i.e. their need for flexible learning that adapts to their respective circumstances. Flexible forms of learning are diverse and range from modular to micro-credited to hybrid/blended learning to online learning, and many others.

EAEA organised a workshop called “**What can ALE educators do to ensure Flexible Learning Pathways are learner-centric?**”; ALE educator participants designed learner-centric curricula using the ENHANCE project methodology and steps to listen to learners.



“I realise we need to empathise with learners before we can begin to design learning pathways for them”

- Adult Educator from Estonia,
ABC of ALE 2025 training participant

Overcoming barriers to adult learning through Flexible Learning Pathways

Flexibility with time

One of the main barriers to participation in adult learning is a lack of time (OECD, 2023). In fact, the OECD (2023) suggests that in OECD countries, “31% of high- and medium-skilled adults who wanted to participate in learning but did not, and 22% of low-skilled adults, cited time as the main reason.” It is not difficult to understand why time is a barrier to participation in lifelong learning and ALE, with family, life and work responsibilities often sighted as the common culprits. Roosmaa and Saar (2016) go further and suggest that lower-skilled adults will have a “greater burden in situational barriers, such as caring responsibilities or employer support; and institutional barriers, such as a lack of learning opportunities tailored to their specific needs”.

Flexible Learning Pathways can offer solutions to a lack of time by altering the mode of employment (online, hybrid, in person), the hours of the content (evenings, weekends, working hours), the place (home, work, institution), as well as if the course is self-paced or modularised. Not all Flexible Learning Pathways have to accommodate all of these choices at once, but the key element is the learner’s ability to choose what suits their lifestyle and commitments.

It is important to note that without flexible working conditions or employers, employees are less likely to be able to take part in Flexible Learning Pathways. In a study on “Workplace Flexibility and Participation in Adult Learning”, Radovan (2024) concludes that employees with flexible working hours are more likely to participate in adult learning and education compared to those with fixed working hours, and the same is true for (partly) remote workers, although being part-time or full time does not impact participation. This suggests that flexibility in *place* (online, home, work) and flexibility in time (weekends, after work, working hours) impact in particular how much an adult is able to, and wants to, partake in adult learning and education.

Good practice

Empowering educators through modular, digital learning: TrainSpot2

The TrainSpot2 project won the EAEA Grundtvig Award in the national category. Led by the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE), [TrainSpot2](#) supports flexible, competence-based learning pathways for adult educators. It connects various digital learning platforms – such as EULE and the MOOC “Digital Trainer” – with the German National Education Platform. By interlinking different learning opportunities and supporting individualised learning paths, TrainSpot2 actively promotes learner autonomy, modularity, and transparency of learning outcomes.

The project’s design makes it highly transferable and scalable. It has laid the foundation for a long-term digital infrastructure and plans to continue through further partnerships, refinement of tools, and integration of AI-supported systems.

“Winning the Grundtvig Award affirms our approach that **flexibility and frameworks can go hand in hand**. With our project TrainSpot, we **empower teachers and trainers** in adult education to develop professionally in their preferred contexts. For our consortium and our organisation, the award is a strong signal for the importance of coordinated professional development.” **Peter Brandt** and **Anne Strauch**; who accepted the award on behalf of the project team.



Peter Brandt and Anne Strauch receiving the award from Lauri Tuomi. Photo: EAEA

Increasing motivation

Simply put, if an adult is not motivated to learn, they are unlikely to do so. Adults are curious about different subjects, desires and interests, and also have different priorities in their life. Flexible Learning Pathways can boost intrinsic motivation for learning by helping adults become more independent in shaping their learning outcomes, by having control over when, how long, and how much they learn (Reinmean, 2023). Flexibility can help adults to remain motivated by allowing them to take short courses, which are directly recognised and thus lead to a sense of achievement.

Conversely, CEDEFOP's VET toolkit for tackling early leaving (CEDEFOP, 2024) suggests that "Learners who are able to switch courses, but are required to start from the beginning, can be discouraged by the need to repeat content they have already covered in their previous course." Recognising and validating prior learning is therefore central to Flexible Learning Pathways. In this way, providing shorter courses or splitting courses into modules makes learning stackable, hence more attainable and motivating.

Good practice

MOVE-UP: Motherhood is an asset

The Erasmus+ MOVE-UP project (2023 – 2024) developed a flexible and quality upskilling pathway for women who are dedicating most of their time and efforts to the role of mother and who are in need to (re)join education activities and the job market. The project offered women seeking to re-enter the job market or those wanting to continue educational efforts with learning opportunities to help identify and recognise competences gained before due to motherhood. A key aspect to increase motivation was the flexibility present in all the learning steps in terms of time, methods, enhancing participation during the process; as well as the importance of self-assessment. Self-assessment and reflection of the competences acquired was a crucial step of their journey and in itself an important moment of learning.

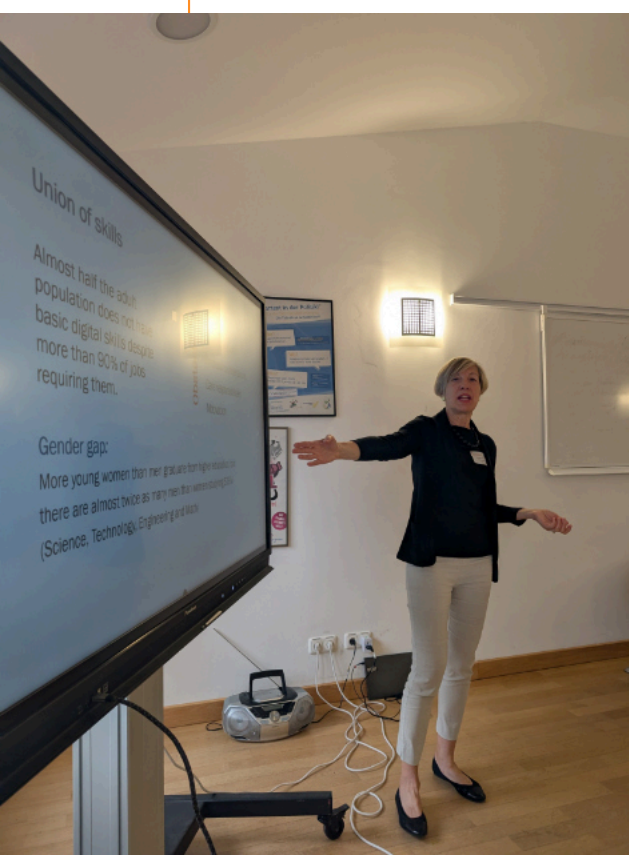
Good practice

Ageing Well: Science-based habits of people who age well

Another Erasmus+ project which EAEA has been working on for the last 2 years focuses on older learners. Older learners, those 65+, often face extra barriers to access to actively participate in learning. The consortium developed an e-learning platform featuring training opportunities for older adults on areas related to digital skills, fostering positive relationships and enhancing resilience, and how to continue to feel physically and mentally active and creative. This training platform can be accessed at any time, autonomously or with a caregiver/companion and free of charge. The language is plain and simple, adequate to the target groups, and the topics were also shown to be important areas of development for older adults - not simply technical skills as digital skills, but also reflections on personal and social competencies and emotional strength.

Findings from “Flexible learning pathways and gender” EAEA Conference, 2025

During the annual conference in Leipzig in June 2025, Forma.Azione organised a workshop on flexible learning pathways and gender sensitivity. The workshop drew links between flexibility in time, schedule and location and gender equality, particularly the inclusion of women in upskilling efforts.



“No action in education is gender-neutral, from the design phase to assessment, every step should contribute to more equal outcomes. Flexibility, data, and a gender lens are essential to creating learning pathways that truly empower all learners.”

- Sylvia Liuti, Form.Azione, EAEA Annual Conference Workshops 2025

Recognition of Prior Learning

Transitioning between education systems can be a challenge for adults participating in adult learning. Particularly for students transitioning from secondary (usually around age 18) to higher education, there is little flexibility in moving freely between the options offered by higher education, vocational learning, non-formal and informal learning (UNESCO, 2024). In reality, this system means that adults who have not gained formal qualifications in certain pathways are unlikely to be able to move to different forms of education as their skills and competencies gathered are not recognised. As the OCED (2023) states:

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the process by which authorised bodies validate an individual's existing knowledge and skills, which may have been acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning.

Recognition of Prior learning can therefore help adult learners to focus on the skills they have acquired through different forms of learning, allowing them to focus on gaining the skills they lack and accessing new career paths (OECD, 2019). In reality, this means shortening the time that it takes to gain a new qualification by allowing adults to “prove” their own competencies in certain subjects and not being asked to re-do courses.

For Flexible Learning Pathways to be mainstreamed in adult learning and education, this requires greater Recognition of Prior Learning, linked to transparency of course outcomes. Guidance services for learning and employment play a crucial role in helping learners navigate different recognition and validation procedures as well as explore learning opportunities.

Good practice

Basic literacy, recognition of prior learning at Lire et Ecrire Belgium

Recognition of Prior learning is an important aspect when talking about adult literacy. Benavot, Hoppers, Lockhart & Hinzen(2022) suggest that to combat the high illiteracy rates that are still prevalent in Europe, education systems should broaden their national frameworks to include literacy skills gained in non-formal and informal learning environments. Where adults have not acquired basic literacy skills through formal education, they often turn to non-formal education often provided by non-profit organisations at the community level, yet the skills gained in such centres are not necessarily as recognised as those gained through the compulsory school system.

In the case of Belgium, the French-speaking Community's 'Lire et Ecrire' continuing education movement is a key provider of literacy training and advocacy. This non-profit organisation was recognised by the French Community Commission (COCOF) as a regional centre for developing literacy and learning French for adults on 1 January 2010. Part of Lire et Ecrire's mission is advocacy for the recognition of non-formal literacy education in the process of requests for Belgian nationality by migrants. As of 2024, they successfully pushed this through Belgian law, allowing thousands of their students to have their training in the centre valorised for certain administrative processes.

Inclusiveness

As the previous example of literacy shows, Flexible Learning Pathways, which include a flexible structure of prior recognition and validation of learning outcomes, can also lead to greater diversity and inclusion in adult learning and education. In line with SDG 4 "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", education systems need to adapt to better support Flexible Learning Pathways (Martin & Godonoga, 2020).

According to AONTAS's 2021 study on participation in lifelong learning in Ireland, the following demographic factors influence participation: age, employment status, occupational class, education experience and region. The study focuses on specific marginalised groups such as women affected by addiction, people impacted by imprisonment, lone parents and people with disabilities. For the latter group, people with disabilities, AONTAS' research suggested that respondents with disabilities were less likely to participate in lifelong learning, due to additional challenges they face, such as the use of digital platforms, stress, mental health, social isolation and adapted equipment (AONTAS, 2022). Different aspects of Flexible Learning Pathways can address these additional challenges, such as offering online and blended learning, self-paced courses that can be stopped and started and stackable modules to suit diverse interests.

Winner of the Grundtvig Award in the category of transnational projects: Citizens Xelerator project

[Citizens Xelerator project](#) won the Grundtvig Award in the category of transnational projects. The project strengthened democratic and civic literacy among adults by promoting social empathy, community engagement, and active participation in democratic life. Led by Mentortec and coordinated by partners in eight European countries, it created flexible learning pathways tailored to adults with unmet literacy and civic needs.

The project supported learners in developing personal, social, digital, financial, and green competences through real-world engagement. Tools like the LifeComp cards and the Citizens Xelerator Action Labs enabled participants to explore community challenges and launch civic initiatives.

“Receiving this award is a significant milestone for Mentortec and for us, as it recognises the transformative impact and innovation of Citizens Xelerator. **We have demonstrated that combining creativity with practicality successfully supports inclusion and democratic engagement, and that adult education remains a driving force for meaningful societal change.** Thank you to our partners and participants for their dedication and commitment to empowering adult learners through flexible and inclusive education across Europe,” says **Marta Reis** from Mentortec.

Findings from “Leading for inclusion, empowering adults through flexible learning pathways in a changing world” EAEA Conference, 2025

The idea underlying the workshop organised by Manos Pavlakis, Frederick University and George A. Koulaouzides, Hellenic Open University was that in order to promote inclusivity in learning, one should understand the exclusivity. In other words, the various barriers that adult learners face, be they personal (such as learning anxiety, low self-esteem or lack of awareness) or systemic (gender/racial discrimination, age, digital exclusion etc.)



“Inclusion is not only opening the door, but also checking what’s blocking the way”

- Adult Educator participant during the EAEA Annual Conference workshops, 2025

What does flexibility in ALE look like?

EAEA's Key findings

1

Sitting down with the learners to discuss what they want to learn, how they want to learn and what is the best place to start. Empathising with learners is the best way to develop learning that meets their needs.

2

Flexibility is not about creating many separate learning scenarios, but about creating space for different learning rhythms and motivations. Intergeneration and mixed-demographic groups are a reality of ALE and ALE educators cannot find individual solutions to all needs, but rather should work to create inclusive spaces that adapt on the go.

3

Some of the best learning happens outside of classrooms. Flexible ALE happens in community spaces, workplaces, online, and outdoors. Bringing learning closer to people's everyday lives increases participation and relevance.

4

Learners appreciate short courses and use-specific learning. Being able to apply short learning opportunities directly to everyday life increases the motivation of adult learners to continue engaging in learning.

5

Where educators are empowered to adapt, they do. Educators need the freedom and trust to adjust methods, materials, and timing in response to learners' realities. Where they have the learners' and institutions' trust, they are able to be truly flexible.

Recommendations for avenues for further development of Flexible Learning Pathways in ALE

Flexible Learning Pathways have shown their potential to make adult learning more inclusive, accessible, and responsive to learners' needs. Yet, there remains significant scope to expand and strengthen these approaches across Europe. These recommendations draw on insights from practice, policy developments, and innovative approaches across the EAEA network. They focus on enhancing flexibility in terms of time, place, learning methods, and recognition of prior learning, while also promoting inclusivity, motivation, and lifelong engagement.

Further implementation of European Qualifications Frameworks

Establishing and implementing National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) is critical for making Flexible Learning Pathways work without causing learning fragmentation. This is because it increases transparency of learning outcomes and therefore encourages transferability to other learning options. As UNESCO (2024) states:

The essential components of the NQFs are the level descriptors that benchmark learning outcomes and the ways to achieve them for different levels of learning programmes. With these crucial tools, Flexible Learning Pathways can be established while ensuring the connectivity, coherence, equivalency, transferability and stackability of diverse learning programmes.

In the EU, there is also the European Qualifications Framework, a transparency tool for qualifications that was revised in 2017 after being set up originally in 2008. The EQF tool is voluntary and by 2022, 36 countries had referenced their NQFs to the EQF (DG EMPL, 2024). The idea behind the EQF is to be a tool to build trust between education and training systems and help individuals to understand where a potential student can study, even if coming from different countries.

According to the results of the evaluation of the EQF that were released in 2024, further implementation of the EQF by member states is needed to bring openness to qualifications offered outside of formal education and training systems (European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2024). Despite ongoing differences in the application of the EQF to national education systems in European countries, i.e. different classifications of educational qualifications and learning objectives, greater adoption of the EQF can lead to more trust in the content of courses in the non-formal and informal (adult) education sphere. This, in turn, can encourage greater mobility of adult learners between different kinds of education, and better uptake of adult learning and education.

This can also contribute to the creation of a truly transnational European education area: Flexible Learning Pathways also mean that it should be easier for learners to have certificates acquired in another EU country, but especially non-formal and informal learning, recognised. A right to paid educational leave for learning opportunities throughout the EU can fundamentally contribute to this - currently, the right to paid educational leave is, in several EU countries, restricted to specific learning opportunities, generally in formal education such as Higher Education and VET, within the region or country.

Exploring micro-credentials in the non-formal sector

Micro-credentials have become relatively developed in various educational sectors, notably, at universities. Open access sites such as Future Learn, Coursera or the Open University offer short, often self-paced courses online which correspond to ETCS credits. Micro credentials have gained particular attention in the EU following the Council of the European Union (EU) [Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability](#). The Council Resolution on a new European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021 – 2030 also references micro credentials:

Exploring the concept and use of micro-credentials can help widen learning opportunities and could strengthen lifelong learning by providing more flexible and modular learning opportunities and offering more inclusive learning paths.

Micro credentials are seen as “smaller in scale in terms of duration or workload, more targeted in terms of skills or subject matter, and more flexible in delivery than traditional degree programmes (OECD, 2021[25])” (OECD, 2023). The same OECD report argues that micro credentials have several characteristics which make them particularly flexible learning options, including:

1. The accelerated pace at which they can be acquired, making them more accessible.
2. Their targeted response to address particular skills shortages.
3. The ability to personalise/select the place, mode and content to meet the needs of the learners.

Micro credentials remain undeveloped in adult learning and education and are often mainly used as work-place learning for adults (EAEA Conference, 2023). Micro-credentials need to be further extended to non-formal education providers as well, i.e. adult learning and education centres, civil society organisations, and non-governmental organisations (including youth organisations and volunteer-based organisations) as they also often provide learning opportunities and can also help develop and make progress on validation arrangements at national levels (EAEA, 2021). Some of the challenges related to building micro-credentials in adult learning and education will come back to the issues related to trust, quality and recognition of outcomes from non-formal and informal learning, cited above. In this framework, adult learning and education providers must work closer with NQFs and EQFs to provide transparent, trustworthy short courses that meet adult learners' needs.

PRISCILLA Workshop during the Lifelong Learning Week; Designing micro-credentials as inclusive learning pathways to foster transversal competences for migrant adult learners in an intersectional perspective.

Further development of Learning Accounts in the non-formal sector

An Individual Learning Account (ILA) system provides an entitlement to lifelong learning attached to individuals (OECD, 2023):

These savings-like accounts award individuals with the right to education and allow them to undertake continuous training throughout their working lives. These accounts can also include paid days of leave that can be used for learning purposes. They should also ideally allow individuals to accumulate and preserve their entitlements over time.

In 2022, the European Union adopted a recommendation that Member States should consider establishing ILAs. As the *compte personnel de formation* in France is the only example of an ILA in Europe, it remains unclear for their potential as a funding instrument for adult learning and education remains unclear. For ILAs to adequately take into account adult learning, they need to adopt all forms of general, vocational, formal and non-formal learning, for personal, professional, social and civic purposes, and not just for the labour market as they are often formulated (EAEA, 2021).

Good practice

Personal Learning Accounts in Wales

The Welsh government started a pilot on Personal Learning Accounts in September 2019 in two colleges. The programme grew from £2m in the pilot year in 2019/20 to £27.4m in 2021/22 and 1,187 enrolments in the 2019/20 academic year rising to 7,603 in the 2020/21 academic year. The main benefits of the programme are:

1. Flexible and responsive local provision to meet skills gaps delivering a flexible programme of learning provision through short courses and higher-level qualifications linked to regional sector priorities; offering accessible learning choices to enable participants to decide on how and when they learn (weekend, evenings etc.)
2. Quality career advice and guidance to interested participants offering an independent assessment prior to learning to ensure the right learning is considered and undertaken. Each participant will complete an individual learning plan through Working Wales and Further Education institutions.
3. Employability support for learners who require additional support to give them the tools and techniques they need to apply for job opportunities.

Information from “Personal Learning Accounts” presentation during the “Individual Learning Accounts” webinar organised in February 2023 by EARLALL.

Source: [PowerPoint Presentation](#)

The PLA in Wales highlights the ability of individual institutions to get involved in piloting individual learning accounts, and hence the potential for adult learning and education providers to work in cooperation with regional and local authorities to do the same.

Quality assurance for non-formal adult learning and education

Quality assurance remains a key issue in ALE, especially in the context of Flexible Learning Pathways and the implementation of micro-credentials and ILAs (see EAEA's paper 'A European Quality Assurance and Recognition System for education must consider adult learning and education and its diversity', 2024). However, quality assurance in ALE can be more challenging than in other sectors because the provision is very fragmented, underfunded in many countries, not clearly defined by law, and it does not easily fit into the other sectors of education.

A 2024 OECD research paper ('Getting Skills Right. Mapping Quality Assurance Indicators for Non-formal Adult Learning') attempts to map existing quality assurance systems in ALE and to compare them with the EQAVET cycle (European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training) commonly used in the (C)VET sector. As also touched upon in the OECD paper, quality can be approached from very different perspectives: it can relate to accreditation (either for institutions or for programmes), it can relate to quality management systems (for example, ISO and other standard systems), and it can relate to the training and professional development of educators and other teaching staff.

Despite various initiatives – and the desire of the sector – to implement quality assurance systems, adult learning and education organisations and providers continue to face barriers, especially of a financial and structural nature. "These include the high costs of implementing QA mechanisms, the reluctance from non-formal training providers to be subject to more bureaucracy, the resistance from formal training providers to the formal certification of the quality of non-formal competitors, the fragmentation of responsibilities regarding adult learning policies across different government levels or the lack of monitoring data (OECD, 2021)" (OECD 2024).

Quality assurance in ALE is essential to enable learners to compare educational offers, stack learning modules and programmes, and thus create their own educational 'portfolio' in the sense of Flexible Learning Pathways. However, the specificities of the ALE sector should be taken into account in quality assurance. Small organisations can also provide high-quality learning programmes. Qualitative data from self-assessment and self-evaluation can be very helpful in understanding quality in ALE (EAEA 2024).

Good practice:

Building national ALE registries to support individual learning accounts

RALExILA is a strategic initiative to investigate and strengthen the structures that support adult learning (ALE), with a particular focus on the potential of Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs).

Across 2024, RALExILA researchers mapped the structure and strategies of ALE registers in 10 European countries (Cyprus, Croatia, Malta, Slovakia, France, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Ireland, Portugal, and Finland), through desk research, focus groups, in-depth interviews, surveys and design thinking workshops, investigating experiences, needs and obstacles and opportunities perceived by adult learners and employers. The main objective was to identify good practice and potential gaps in the ALE registries of these countries, with a focus on governance, quality assurance and accessibility.

Some countries have introduced ILAs to provide financial support and incentives for adult education and training. Examples include Malta's "Get Qualified" programme, France's "Compte Personnel de Formation" and the Netherlands' "STAP Budget". These accounts aim to increase adult participation in lifelong learning and skills development.



Anna Skocz speaking at the RALExILA workshop, December 2024. Photo owner: EAEA

Final reflections: Towards resilience & community building

This past year, our focus on Flexible Learning Pathways has reminded us that adult learning is most powerful when it meets people where they are. We have seen countless examples of learners finding new confidence and direction because their journeys were made adaptable, accessible, and relevant to their lives. **Flexibility means celebrating the diversity of people's experiences, recognising different starting points, and ensuring that everyone has a way forward in learning, no matter their circumstances.**

When providers, educators, and communities create space for people to learn in ways that fit their realities, they do more than remove barriers - they **create space for growth**. This past theme has shown us that flexible learning is **not just a response to change, but a tool to empower people to shape it.**

Looking ahead, Resilience and Community-building will be our 2026 theme. EAEA's 2026 annual theme responds to several key EU initiatives: the Union of Skills and Competitiveness Compass, the Commission's proposed Education Package, and the EU and Commission Work Plan 2026. Together, these frameworks aim to equip future generations with the skills needed for a competitive and resilient Europe. In line with these priorities, EAEA will focus on strengthening both personal and societal resilience through inclusive, community-based adult learning and education.

In 2026, EAEA will further advance knowledge in inclusive learning methodologies that foster community resilience, strengthening the capacity of ALE providers to adapt to social and economic change. We will explore how learning strengthens the bonds between people and gives us the courage to face uncertainty together. In times of crisis, division, and transformation, adult learning can nurture solidarity, create spaces of care, and build communities that are not only adaptable for individuals but for societies as a whole.

Thank you to all the EAEA board, members and staff who contributed to the 2025 annual theme, and we look forward to our continued work.

Bibliography

AES. (2024). *Adult Learning - Participants*. Retrieved from European Commission Statistics Explained. [Link](#).

AONTAS. (2022). *Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland, Focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups*. AONTAS.

Benavot, A., Hoppers, C., Lockhart, A., & Hinzen, H. (2022). Reimagining adult education and lifelong learning for all: Historical and critical perspectives. *International Review of Education* , 68: 165-194.

CEDEFOP. (2014). *Briefing Note: Encouraging Adult Learning*. CEDEFOP.

CEDEFOP. (2024, January 1). *VET toolkit for tackling early leaving* . Retrieved December 17, 2025, from CEDEFOP. [Link](#).

Council of the European Union. (2021). Council Resolution on a new European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021 - 2030. *Official Journal of the European Union*.

DG EMPL. (2024, April 2). *The European Qualifications Framework: a key tool for transparency of qualifications*. Retrieved from European Year of Skills. [Link](#).

EAEA. (2024). *A European Quality Assurance and Recognition System for education must consider adult learning and education and its diversity*. [Link](#).

EAEA. (2021). *Contribution to the public consultation on Individual Learning Accounts*. [Link](#).

EAEA. (2021). EAEA Contribution to the Commission's Micro-credentials Open Public Consultation. [Link](#).

European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. (2024). *Study Supporting the Evaluation of the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning*. Publications Office of the European Union.

Generalitat de Catalunya. (2022, May 12). Micro Credentials. *European Approach to Microcredentials Webinar*. EARLALL.

Leiden University. (Unknown, Unknown Unknown). *Flexible Learning Pathways*. Retrieved December 17, 2024, from Universiteit Leiden. [Link](#).

Martin, M., & Godonoga, A. (2020). *SDG 4 - Policies for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

OECD. (2019). *Getting skills right, Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD. (2023). *Flexible adult learning provision: What it is, why it matters*, .

OECD. (2024). *Getting Skills Right. Mapping Quality Assurance Indicators for Non-formal Adult Learning*. [Link](#).

Radovan, M. (2024). *Workplace Flexibility and Participation in Adult Learning*. Sustainability.

Reinmean, J. (2023). Designing flexible learning pathways through microdegree. *European Journal of University Lifelong Learning*, 75 - 80.

UNESCO. (2024, June 21). *Flexible learning pathways: A more relevant future for all*. Retrieved 12 17, 2024, from UNESCO. [Link](#).

UNEVOC. (2024, January 1). *TVETipedia Glossary*. Retrieved December 17, 2024, from UNEVOC-UNESCO. [Link](#).