

Consultation report: member feedback on the OECD study 'Trends in Adult Learning'

(Revised Version of the discussion paper – January 2026, incorporating EBSN & EAEA member consultations)

Introduction

In 2024, the OECD published the results of the second cycle of the **Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)**, offering a fresh decade-long perspective on skills and learning. The first round (2013) gave a sobering picture: 20% of the EU working-age population had low literacy and numeracy skills. One might have hoped for a comprehensive reaction. However, the 2023 data reveal that while some countries have made progress, structural inequalities remain deeply entrenched. Participation in adult learning has stagnated in many nations, a worrying trend given the critical role of skills in adapting to the twin green and digital transitions.

This paper highlights key results of the OECD study and integrates critical reflections and good practices provided by **EBSN and EAEA members** during the consultation period (November–December 2025).

1. Participation trends and the "low-skills trap"

The latest OECD data presents a complex picture. In many countries, participation in adult learning has stagnated or declined. However, there are notable exceptions. **Data from Ireland (CSO/PIAAC 2024) and Estonia** demonstrates significant growth in participation rates, driven largely by non-formal job-related learning.

Yet, rising tide statistics can mask deepening inequalities. As pointed out by **NALA (Ireland)**, citing the latest PIAAC figures, while overall participation numbers in Ireland have improved, the **participation gap** between adults with high versus low educational attainment has notably widened. Similarly, the **Nordic Network** reports that while general participation remains high in their region, literacy proficiency among younger adults is showing concerning downward trends.

Overall, the "Matthew Principle" (those who have, get more) remains valid. However, we must be precise in our terminology. As noted by **VHS (Austria)**, referencing "privileged groups" can be imprecise; it is more accurate to say that declines are steepest among those with **structural advantages**, such as high initial education and job security, who previously led in participation.

University of Hamburg (Germany) reminds us that the current crisis is also historical: a failure to invest in civic and ecological adult education since the 1970s has contributed to current democratic deficits.

2. The relevance of learning vs. "Motivation"

The OECD frames non-participation often as "adults are not motivated to learn". While true for some, the core problem is often the *relevance* of the training. If learning does not solve an immediate problem or improve life, adults will not commit to it.

Member Reflection: Reframing the Motivation Myth

Our consultation revealed a strong consensus: the phrase "adults are not motivated" is a dangerous simplification.

- **Contextualise, don't blame: NoCode Institute (Portugal)** argues that motivation is rarely the issue; rather, it is the disconnection between training offers and real needs. Motivation emerges naturally when training is contextualised in real-world projects.
- **Problem-Solving Focus: CEIPES (Italy)** and the **Ministry of Education (Greece)** emphasise that for learners with low basic skills, relevance means solving immediate daily problems—banking, supporting children, filling out forms—rather than abstract skill-building.
- **Methodology: ARGE Bildungshäuser (Austria)** suggests that providers must conduct interviews to understand the "everyday realities" of the target group before designing courses.

SPOTLIGHT: Good Practices on Relevance & Co-Creation

- **La Verneda - Sant Martí (Spain/Austria):** Highlighted by **ARGE**, this is a community-based school built on dialogic principles where learners co-create the curriculum and govern the school themselves, ensuring 100% relevance.
- **Level Up Adult Education (Austria):** A programme by **VHS** offering free, open access to basic education (100–400 hours) tailored to various target groups, removing the barrier of rigid course structures.
- **Life Skills for Europe (LSE):** This project as a framework for learner-centred approaches that create effective outreach by focusing on capabilities rather than deficits.

3. Breaking down the barriers: time and cost

Barriers to learning persist. The most commonly cited are "lack of time" (due to work/family) and cost. The OECD notes that informal workplace learning is also in decline.

Member Reflection: Structural Solutions to Structural Problems

Members strongly rejected the idea that "lack of time" is an individual failure. It is a structural barrier that requires structural solutions.

- **Redefining "Time":** The **University of Hamburg (Germany)** notes that "no time" is often a proxy for "low priority" from supervisors. They advocate for legal entitlements to **educational leave** (e.g., 5 days/year) specifically to assist shift workers.

- **Precariousness: NoCode Institute** highlights that irregular schedules and labour precariousness make planning impossible. They propose tax incentives for companies and integrated social support (childcare, transport) as essential.
- **Flexible Formats:** To combat time poverty, **CEIPES (Italy)** and **Greek partners** suggest **microlearning** (10-15 minute units) and asynchronous courses. Furthermore, **NALA (Ireland)** emphasized that a range of flexible **online and blended learning options** (such as 'Learn with NALA') are crucial to making adult learning truly accessible.

SPOTLIGHT: Good practices on workplace & flexible learning

- **GO Model & "Simply Better!" (Switzerland): SVEB/Academia** utilize a federal programme offering subsidized, job-embedded training. The "GO Model" uses a 5-step framework (analysis to evaluation) to integrate reading, writing, and digital skills directly into working hours.
- **Second Chance Schools (Greece): The Ministry of Education** highlights project-based teaching linked to life skills (bills, economics) for adults who did not complete Junior High School, offering flexible scheduling.

4. Outreach: building trust beyond campaigns

The paper asks: "How do we reach potential learners?". While TV campaigns have their place, success often happens at the local level through trust.

Member Reflection: From Broad Campaigns to Local Trust

- **Peer-to-Peer Approaches:** The **Swiss Umbrella Organisation for Reading and Writing (DVLS)** and others highlight the power of "Peer Ambassadors"—former learners who can speak authentically to potential participants.
- **Reducing Thresholds: ARGE (Austria)** shared the success of sending programmes via postal service directly to homes to lower the fear threshold.
- **Community Hubs: CEIPES (Italy)** recommends utilizing libraries and sports clubs to bring learning into familiar, non-threatening spaces.
- **Plain Language:** Finally, **DVLS (Switzerland)** emphasizes that outreach fails if the message is unintelligible; the adoption of **Plain Language** standards is therefore a prerequisite for any successful access strategy.

SPOTLIGHT: Good Practices on Outreach & Inclusion

- **Ambassador Groups (Switzerland): DVLS** organizes peer networks where former learners ("Botschaftergruppen") encourage others to improve basic skills, bridging the trust gap.
- **Festival of Learning (Pécs, Hungary):** Highlighted by **Learn for Life**, this is an annual event supported by concerts and fairs where regional businesses promote products and learning is celebrated publicly, destigmatizing adult education.

- **Deaf-Friendly City (Fermo, Italy):** A project improving accessibility for deaf residents through digital tools, showing how outreach must also be inclusive of disabilities.

5. Governance and Funding: A Systemic Approach

"We need to improve school education" is a common argument, but it ignores the 80% of the 2035 workforce who have already left school. We need a systemic approach, not just school reform.

Member reflection: moving beyond the project trap

There is a unanimous call to move from short-term project funding to legal frameworks.

- **The "School Model" of Funding: VHS (Austria)** argues that project-based funding is obsolete. They propose that Adult Education should be financed with the same legal certainty as the **formal school system**—secured by federal law and managed by a central body to prevent fragmentation across ministries.
- **Sustainable Contracts: NoCode Institute** proposes "Territorial Pacts for Qualification" and a shift to predictable 3-5 year funding contracts instead of annual competitions.
- **Professionalisation:** The **University of Hamburg** warns against the "deprofessionalization" of the sector and calls for recognised career paths for adult educators.

SPOTLIGHT: Good Practices on Governance & Strategy

- **Qualifica Programme (Portugal): NoCode Institute** points to this integrated governance model involving ministries and a network of centres to articulate adult qualification, linking training to labour market needs.
- **Partner UP (EU Project):** This project offers examples for creating ownership, accountability, and partnerships among stakeholders.

6. Emerging Themes: Missing Links

(New Chapter based on Member Feedback)

Our consultation identified critical areas that must be integrated into future strategies:

1. **AI & Democracy: NALA (Ireland)** urges the sector to empower educators to teach AI literacy and ensure voting processes are accessible. The **"National Skills Conversation"** in Ireland explicitly links low skills, AI, and voting accessibility.
2. **Learning Cities: Learn for Life (Netherlands)** proposes adopting the **UNESCO Learning Cities** concept (citing examples like Larissa, Greece) to address urbanisation, climate change, and health risks holistically.
3. **The ageing society: xs4all (Netherlands)** reminds us that "Lifelong Learning" must not stop at retirement. With Europe's ageing demographic, the strategy must

explicitly include older adults, focusing on digital inclusion, health literacy, and active citizenship.

Conclusion

The answer to low skills is not to blame the learner for "lack of motivation," but to build a system that is **relevant, flexible, and structurally supported**.

Appendices:

Annex 1: Comprehensive list of best practices, projects and resources referenced by the members.