



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

For Information

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State of the Union 2026: Europe needs to learn to be together, not only to respond to crises

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In her State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen described a Europe facing both “great possibilities” and “great perils”. The speech put a strong emphasis on security, defence, competitiveness and technological change, while also reaffirming Europe’s social model and the need to invest in people and skills.

For EAEA, many of the challenges identified in the speech are familiar. However, Europe’s response cannot focus only on managing the consequences of crises. Adult learning and education (ALE) can help address some of their root causes by building competences, confidence, critical thinking, stronger communities and people’s capacity to shape change themselves.

Opening her speech with Charles Dickens’ famous words, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”, von der Leyen described a Union that is simultaneously strong and precarious. However, the increasingly strong language of war, security and geopolitical competition throughout the speech gives this a different taste. While we agree that security matters, particularly in the current geopolitical context, we firmly believe that resilience cannot be built through defence, economic security and technological sovereignty alone. Europe also needs to invest in the resilience of its people and communities.



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Investing in people through times of change

EAEA welcomes von der Leyen's emphasis on the European social model and the need to ensure that economic transformation works for people. In her speech, von der Leyen also addressed the question of how Europe finances a rapidly changing economy.

For ALE, this question of financing is crucial. The green and digital transitions, demographic change and a changing world of work will require millions of Europeans to acquire new competences. A sustainable and just transition will, however, not happen without sustained public investment in the people expected to make that change happen.

EAEA emphasises that skills policy must not be reduced to matching workers with the immediate needs of the labour market. People are not only workers. They are also citizens, parents, carers, neighbours and members of communities. They need professional and technical skills, but also literacy, digital and media literacy, citizenship competences, creativity, critical thinking and the confidence to act. Especially in such a rapidly changing world, life skills are more important than ever; they should be the first thought and not the last when it comes to developing education systems.

This is also why the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, whose anniversary von der Leyen highlighted, remain important. Lifelong learning is enshrined as a social right in the Pillar of Social Rights. However, with a [participation rate of only 47% of adults in education and training](#), Europe is still a long way from realising this right: it requires accessible learning opportunities, sustainable providers, well-trained adult educators, guidance and outreach, and adequate financing in European, national, regional and local budgets.

Rafał and Pekka - and thousands of less visible European stories

One of the most inspiring moments in the speech was the story of Rafał and Pekka, who met through Erasmus, later received Horizon Europe funding and went on to scale their ideas and innovate in space technology. It is an excellent illustration of what learning, mobility, European cooperation and sustained investment can make possible.

Similar transformations happen through ALE every day - usually, however, without satellites, headlines or major investment rounds. They happen when someone discovers a new calling in an ALE course and develops a new talent - sometimes even builds a new profession and company - around it.

They happen when a parent who has struggled with literacy for most of their life can finally read a bedtime story to their child. When an older person learns to make video calls and can see their grandchildren living hundreds of kilometres away. When a migrant joins a language course and finds not only words in a new language, but friends and a community in a new country.



And they happen collectively: when people acquire new skills and knowledge and use them to rethink how their communities manage water, reduce waste, recycle and upcycle materials, or green public spaces; when communities are improving life today while protecting clean air, water and a liveable climate for future generations. When informed communities come together, they counteract disinformation and other threats to democracy, contributing to the development of real democratic processes.

There are thousands of such stories across Europe. Most will never appear in a State of the Union speech. Their economic value - or "Return on Investment" - may also be difficult to capture in traditional indicators. But all these learner stories and biographies show the [transformative power of ALE on an individual, community, and society level.](#)

Resilience starts in communities

This wider understanding of resilience is particularly relevant to [EAEA's 2026 annual theme, Resilience and Community-Building.](#) ALE centres and other community learning spaces are part of Europe's social infrastructure. They create places where people meet across different walks of life, gain competences and confidence, build networks and develop the capacity to act together.

This matters because many of the challenges identified in the State of the Union cannot be addressed only after they have become crises. Rather than only developing increasingly innovative ways to deal with the consequences of exclusion, polarisation, technological disruption, climate change or democratic disengagement, Europe needs to invest much more seriously in prevention and in tackling the root causes of these issues.

This is the job of ALE. It strengthens literacy before exclusion builds trenches (no pun intended) in communication and between communities. It builds digital competences before digitalisation becomes (yet) another barrier to participation. It creates social connections before isolation becomes loneliness - and, potentially, hatred towards certain groups of society. It develops environmental knowledge and collective capacity before communities face increasingly severe consequences of climate change.

AI needs educated and empowered citizens of all ages

The same applies to artificial intelligence. The State of the Union places AI firmly within Europe's competitiveness and technological sovereignty agenda. However, the main question that we should ask ourselves is not how quickly European companies adopt AI or how much Europe invests in its development. It is which role, rights and responsibilities European citizens - and, by extension, also European companies - want to give to AI development and implementation.



We acknowledge that AI is likely here to stay; this is why Europe, more than any investment in technological advancement, needs investment in AI literacy, critical thinking, creativity and social action so that the development and use of artificial intelligence serve society and its people – and not the other way around. Latest data on this shows that 60% of people aged 16-74 in the EU had basic digital skills in 2025, still 20 percentage points below the EU's 2030 target of 80%.

This goes far beyond workplace training. As von der Leyen mentioned in her speech, adults increasingly have to make decisions about AI in their everyday lives. Parents, for example, are confronted with questions about screen time, children's access to digital and AI tools, privacy, online information and how technology affects learning and relationships. ALE can provide spaces where these questions are explored collectively rather than leaving individuals to navigate fundamental technological and societal changes alone.

Democracy belongs to everyone - but participation needs to be learned

One of the strongest statements in von der Leyen's speech was her insistence that democratic power belongs to everyone.

"We believe that power does not belong to the strongest, the richest or the loudest, but to all of us."

- Ursula von der Leyen,
President of the European Commission

For ALE, there is an important consequence: if democracy belongs to everyone, everyone must have opportunities throughout life to develop the knowledge, confidence and competences needed to participate in it. This includes civil society providers of ALE: they need to be granted access to decision-making processes, requiring a democratisation of governance structures in education. This equally applies to educators and learners: **they are key stakeholders and citizens, and democracy belongs to all of them.**

Citizenship education cannot end with school. In a period of polarisation, disinformation and rapid technological change, adults need opportunities to develop critical thinking and media literacy, encounter people with different experiences and opinions, understand political and societal developments and learn how to participate and speak up.

This also has a gender dimension. ALE does not simply give women additional skills. At its best, it builds self-confidence and creates communities in which women support each other, develop their ambitions along diverse pathways and gain the confidence to challenge injustice.

Europe's diversity, which von der Leyen described as one of its strengths, needs these spaces for learning and encounter if it is to become a lived reality rather than an abstract European value.

Europe needs to invest upstream

The State of the Union presents a Europe searching for answers to war and insecurity, economic transformation, technological disruption, climate change, inequality and threats to democracy.

ALE cannot solve all these challenges. However, it can change the conditions in which they emerge and the capacity of people and communities to respond to them. This requires a shift in perspective. Europe cannot focus predominantly on fighting symptoms, i.e. dealing with crises once their consequences have become visible, while systematically underinvesting in the people, communities and learning infrastructures that could prevent problems, manage change and build resilience in the first place.

The decisions on the EU's next long-term budget are therefore critical. If Europe is serious about a just transition, social cohesion, democracy and resilience, financing ALE cannot be an afterthought. Erasmus+, the European Social Fund and other European and national funding instruments need to provide sustainable investment in learning throughout life - including non-formal and community-based ALE. For this reason, EAEA, together with the Lifelong Learning Platform, launched a campaign entitled "[Cuts cost more](#)", to raise awareness of the crucial role of European funding for ALE, at a time when public funding at the national and regional levels weakens.

Investing in ALE means investing in people's ability not simply to cope with change, but to shape it, in their workplaces, families, communities and democracies. That is one of the foundations on which a genuinely resilient Europe can be built. No amount of war preparation will be able to replace this.

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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