EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

AONTAS The Voice of Adult Learning

Adult Learning at the heart of a resilient, democratic and competitive Europe

Joint statement by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) and AONTAS, The National Adult Learning Organisation, in the context of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union and at the dawn of a new Europe.

EAEA and AONTAS support the priorities set by Ireland for its Council Presidency. Adult education is a key policy lever for the protection of European **values and democracy, and the realisation of security and resilience, competitiveness and delivery**. If we want to meaningfully achieve these priorities, it is essential to keep the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) budget up to the task, **by investing more not less**.

The global challenges we are going through are impacting every aspect of our lives. But Europe's capacity to respond to democratic, technological, economic and social change ultimately depends on its people: on their ability to learn throughout their lives, participate in their communities, adapt to shocks and shape the societies in which they live.

Adult learning therefore cannot be treated as a peripheral education issue. EAEA and AONTAS are working on the frontline to prove this:

Values and democracy: it starts with empowered learners

"Democracy is a system of governance in which power resides with the people, allowing them to participate in decision-making processes, typically through voting."[1]

[1] UNESCO's definition

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In a rapidly changing information environment, literacy, critical thinking and basic skills remain fundamental, but they are no longer sufficient on their own. Adults also need digital and media literacy, and an understanding of emerging technologies, including AI, to critically assess information, recognise disinformation and participate meaningfully in democratic life.

But how do we guarantee this?

The EU's Action Plan on Basic Skills[2] now explicitly recognises citizenship alongside literacy, mathematics, science and digital skills as a basic skill, reflecting the fact that foundational competences are essential not only for employment but also for active participation in democratic life.

Adult learning creates spaces in which people can develop these capacities while strengthening their confidence and agency. Crucially, learners must not only participate in education: **they must have a voice in shaping the learning opportunities, policies and systems that affect them.**

This approach is reinforced by the **European Democracy Shield**[3], which recognises societal resilience and citizens' engagement as a core dimension of protecting European democracy. Its recognition of the vital role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in educating and empowering citizens marks an important step forward in strengthening citizens' participation in democratic life.

Analysis of the Irish Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) data found that higher levels of literacy and information processing skills are associated with stronger social outcomes, including greater perceived political influence, higher levels of trust and increased participation in volunteering.[4] Skills, confidence and trust go together which is why adult learning matters for democratic life.

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[2] European Commission (2026) *Basic skills*. European Education Area. Available at: https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/school-education/basic-skills.
[3] European Commission (2025) *European Democracy Shield: documents*. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/european-democracy-shield-documents_en.
[4] Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2025) *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2023: Skills Use and Social Outcomes, Social Outcomes*. Cork: CSO. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-piaac/programmefortheinternationalassessmentofadultcompetenciespiaac2023-skillsuseandsocialoutcomes/socialoutcomes/.

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Testimonials from Irish practitioners describe how this works in practice:

> "You know the active citizenship voter education [...] Like a lot of the work we do is helping people to kind of engage. To find their voice, to find their confidence, to question." [5]
>
> Practitioner from AONTAS

> "And then we also do the trip to the Dáil as part of that programme. So, they're seeing about local politics, and then Government [...] and it's fantastic [...] we've had women that never voted before, and then they went out and voted in the local election."[6]
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> Practitioner from AONTAS

Yet adult education, which has historically played a transformative role in fostering civic participation, social inclusion, and democratic agency, is widely under-resourced.[7] Moreover, there is a gap in citizenship education and participatory provision for adult learners.[8]

For EAEA and AONTAS, **investing in adult learning is therefore also an investment in democratic participation, trust and citizens' capacity to exercise their rights and make their voices heard.**

Security and resilience: empowered learners build resilient communities

Resilience starts with people, but it is built in communities.

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[5] Cobain, E. and Jackson, R. (2025) *Community Education for Social Transformation*. Dublin: AONTAS. Available at: https://www.aontas.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Community-Education-for-Social-Transformation.pdf.

[6] Cobain and Jackson (2025)

[7] Nuissl, E., Sava, S. and Farkas, É. (2024) 'Adult education in the European Union since 1993', *European Journal of Education*, article e12719. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12719.

[8] European Parliament (2022) *Report on the implementation of citizenship education actions*, A9-0060/2022. Committee on Culture and Education (Rapporteur: Domènec Ruiz Devesa). Brussels: European Parliament. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0060_EN.html.

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Europe's security cannot be understood solely in military or technological terms[9]. Societies also need people who can respond to change, critically navigate information, adapt to technological transformation and remain connected to their communities.

Adult and community education plays a particularly important role here. Community-based providers create trusted and accessible learning environments and can reach adults who face barriers to participation in formal education. They can reconnect people with learning while strengthening social inclusion, participation and cohesion.

Community educators are already delivering this. **AONTAS's Community Education Against Disinformation workbook equips tutors to teach critical thinking, fact-checking and to see how algorithms and AI shape what learners see.** It was trialled with community learner groups.[10] A voter education programme led by the Dublin Adult Learning Centre, with the support of the Education and Training Board of Ireland and AONTAS, has delivered tutor training in ETBs and community organisations across Ireland. This had had a measurable impact on learners, increasing awareness and capacity for civic engagement. One ESOL learner had lived in Ireland for 23 years without knowing she could vote, demonstrating the potential for inclusion that this programme supports.[11]

This local infrastructure matters at European level. Communities in which people have access to learning, information and meaningful opportunities for participation are better equipped to respond to disinformation, polarisation and social and technological change.

Competitiveness and delivery: resilient communities build an adaptable Europe

The same skills that enable people to navigate society also enable them to navigate a changing world of work: literacy, digital and media literacy, critical thinking and adaptability.

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[9] Tessari, F. (2025) 'Non-formal civic education reduces vulnerability to populism, disinformation: expert', *EU Perspectives*, 26 December. Available at: https://euperspectives.eu/2025/12/civic-education-reduces-vulnerability-to-populism/.

[10] Falanga, R. *et al.* (2025) *Community Education Against Disinformation (CEAD) Workbook*. Dublin: AONTAS. Available at: https://www.aontas.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/CEADWorkbook_Design_WebVersion.pdf.

[11] Connaughton-O'Connor, F. and Hawkins, S. (2024) *Report on Active Citizenship Voter Education Project*. Dublin: Dublin Adult Literacy Centre. Available at: https://www.vote.ie/assets/files/pdf/report_on_active_citizenship_voter_education_project.pdf.

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The EU has set an ambitious objective of having at least 60% of adults participating in training every year by 2030. Yet Europe remains far from this ambition, with persistent gaps in basic skills making increasing participation in adult learning even more relevant. The Programme for International Student Assessment results show that basic-skills challenges are already emerging among young people, who will be the next adults, while PIAAC demonstrates that they persist throughout adulthood. **These challenges do not end with compulsory education**: across participating OECD countries, 26% of adults have low proficiency in literacy, 25% in numeracy and 29% in adaptive problem solving. In Ireland, the figures are 21%, 25% and 28% respectively.

Against this backdrop, reaching the EU's 60% adult-learning participation target is not simply a quantitative objective: it is essential to ensuring that adults have opportunities to maintain, strengthen and update the skills they need throughout their lives.

There is a key challenge to be addressed in achieving this goal. Participation in lifelong learning is not evenly distributed across society but is stratified along socioeconomic lines. **Adults with lower educational attainment and fewer economic resources are substantially less likely to engage in learning opportunities, reproducing existing patterns of social inequality.** [12]

This highlights an urgent need to invest in adult education and to ensure these pathways are open to those who need them. The urgency of investing in skills is also strongly reflected in the Draghi Report on the future of European competitiveness[13]. The report identifies skills shortages as a major barrier to innovation and competitiveness and calls for a fundamental rethink of Europe's approach to skills, with stronger investment in education and adult learning throughout people's lives. Draghi notably argued that, if Europe is to compete globally on innovation, it must strengthen its performance in education and adult learning.

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[12] CEDEFOP (2023) Do low-educated adults have fewer opportunities to participate in education and training?', *Data insights*, 8 December. Available at: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/data-insights/11-do-low-educated-adults-have-fewer-opportunities-participate-education-and-training;
SOLAS (2025) *Lifelong learning amongst adults in Ireland - Q4 2024*. Dublin: SOLAS, Skills and Labour Market Research Unit. Available at: https://a.storyblok.com/f/70398/x/f7897760f2/lifelong-learning-amongst-adults-in-ireland-q4-2024.pdf;
OECD (2025) *Trends in Adult Learning: New Data from the 2023 Survey of Adult Skills*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/trends-in-adult-learning_ec0624a6-en.html.
[13] Draghi, M. (2024) *The future of European competitiveness*. Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/competitiveness/draghi-report_en.

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Yet the implementation gap remains significant. As of July 2026, **only 15.7% of the Draghi Report's 383 recommendations had been fully implemented, while 25.6% had been partially implemented**.[14] **This gap between ambition and delivery reinforces the need for the Irish Presidency to accelerate action on the structural conditions for European competitiveness, including skills and lifelong learning.**

Europe cannot achieve its competitiveness ambitions while significant numbers of adults continue to face barriers to learning or gaps in basic and digital skills.[15]

This challenge is recognised at the highest level of the EU competitiveness agenda, and the Union of Skills[16] places lifelong learning, basic skills and upskilling and reskilling at the centre of Europe's response to labour and skills shortages. Yet participation cannot be reduced to supplying skills to the labour market. A strong lifelong-learning ecosystem gives people the capacity to move between jobs and sectors, respond to technological change and participate fully in society.

Community education is part of this ecosystem. For adults who have been excluded from, or had negative experiences of, formal education, it can provide an accessible route back into learning and towards further education, training and employment.

In Ireland, this route is documented. An evaluation of An Cosán's one-year community-based higher education certificate, delivered with South East Technological University, found that 85% of learners gained an award, against a 75% completion rate for mainstream full-time undergraduates, and 62% were first-time mature entrants.[17] Further research with eight community education groups working with lone parents had successful learner progression into further and higher education, training and employment, most often in social care, childcare and special needs assisting: areas of labour shortage.[18]

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[14] European Policy Innovation Council (EPIC) (2026) *Draghi Implementation Index: July 2026 Update*. Available at: https://thinkepic.eu/publication/1512/.
[15] European Commission (2025) *State of the Digital Decade 2025 report*. Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/state-digital-decade-2025-report.
[16] European Commission (2025) *Union of Skills*. Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Available at: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/union-skills_en.
[17] Murray, T. and Brennan, R. (2023) *Igniting Community-Based Higher Education: An evaluation of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development award offered by An Cosán as a Linked Provider of the South East Technological University*. Dublin: An Cosán. Available at: https://ancosan.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Igniting_Community_Based_Higher_Education_Report-FINAL.pdf.
[18] Eustace, A., Bailey, I. and Tubridy, A. (2023) *Community Education as a Support for Lone Parents: Thematic Analysis of Eight Case Studies*. Dublin: Centre for Effective Services.

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AONTAS research also shows evidence of this value:

> "Through community education, I did my Essential Skills Math, English, ICT, OCN in Perinatal Mental Health, my Level 2 and 3 Community Development. I became a certified mental health first aider, designated officer in safeguarding children, protested for a mother and baby unit, spoke at Stormont and a psychology event. I took part in [a] woman breaking barriers course on the challenges women faced trying to get back to work and completed an access course through the Open University,[...] That is why I feel it is so important to have community education because through the lows, the centre lifted me and supported me, guiding me with classes and programmes with ways to better myself and heal."[19]
> Adult Learner from AONTAS

> "You can follow a different path. Not just a traditional (one) ... for a young person or even a middle-aged person who wants to change ... how many options there are, it is literally lifelong learning if you want to. There's so much out there. Because I have a lad now who's doing the Leaving Cert so it's great to know that he has other options. Takes pressure off, you know."[20]
> Adult Learner from AONTAS

Investment in adult learning should therefore be understood not as a cost, but as part of Europe's social and economic infrastructure. **Cuts do not make needs disappear; they shift costs elsewhere** - through skills shortages, unemployment, exclusion, digital divides and weaker social and democratic resilience.[21]

The effects are already visible on the island of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, reported enrolment reductions in further education total 7,748, and ESOL, essential skills and some community education provisions have been cut.[22]

Available at: https://www.communityfoundation.ie/wp-content/uploads/BeachaireApril2024.pdf.

[19] Cobain and Jackson (2025)

[20] Farrell, K., Finn, P., Meyler, A. and Murray, T. (2025) *Learner Voices Across Ireland: The National FET Learner Forum Report, 2024-2025.* Dublin: AONTAS. Available at: https://www.aontas.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/AONTAS-Learner-Voices-Across-Ireland-Report_Final.pdf.

[21] To see our full proposals, see European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) (2026) *Cuts cost more!* campaign. Brussels: EAEA. Available at: https://eaea.org/our-work/influencing-policy/campaigns/.

[22] AONTAS (2026) 'AONTAS Statement on Further Education Funding Cuts in Northern Ireland', AONTAS, 24 September. Available at:

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Investing to deliver: Europe must enable the lifelong-learning ecosystem to work

If Europe expects adult learning to contribute to democracy, resilience and competitiveness, it must create the conditions for the sector to deliver.

The negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) are an opportunity to translate Europe's ambitions into investment. EAEA and AONTAS call for a future EU budget that recognises lifelong learning as a strategic investment and ensures that adult learners and adult-learning providers are not left behind.

In particular, we call on Member States and EU institutions to:

- **Reflect on the hazardous consequences a cut to the MFF budget would bring to society,** harming its resilience and trust in the institutions.
- **Ensure that the final MFF does not fall below** the European Commission's proposed overall envelope of **€1.98 trillion** (in current prices).
- **Protect and name adult education in Erasmus+ by supporting the European Parliament's position of €47.39 billion,** protecting it against reallocation, making adult and community education explicit and protected in the regulation and guidance.
- **Protect dedicated, identifiable budget lines for the European Social Fund (ESF+)** within the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), including clear allocations for adult and community education, **with a clear breakdown of the 14% social floor as a minimum.**
- **Recognise the distinct role of such funds** in supporting cross border cooperation, mobility, inclusion and access to learning; protect **sustainable support for community-based adult-learning providers**, particularly those working with people facing the greatest barriers to participation; **and ensure simplification genuinely improves access to EU funding**, rather than concentrating opportunities among organisations with the greatest administrative capacity.

https://www.aontas.com/aontas-statement-on-further-education-funding-cuts-in-northern-ireland/.

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The Irish Presidency has an opportunity to demonstrate that **values, resilience and competitiveness are not separate ambitions**. All three depend on people having the opportunity and capacity to continue learning throughout their lives.

By investing in learners and the communities that support them, Europe invests in its democratic strength, its capacity to adapt and its future prosperity.

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