Adult education must be a space for resistance and transformation

Adult participation in learning in Portugal has declined since 2016 and remains below the EU average. European funds are supporting ongoing efforts to reverse this trend. PESSOAS 2023, financed through the ESF+, supports adult education via the QUALIFICA Centres, which aim to reach 700,000 participants by 2029, and through the Educao e Formao de Adultos (EFA) programmes, which offer double certification opportunities enabling adults to improve their basic skills.

The Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) supports the participation of adults in local training programmes on basic skills, literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, and streamlines the validation of competences. However, outreach and participation remain key challenges in the Portuguese context, particularly among adults with lower levels of skills.

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Skills dimension

EAEA members welcome the European focus on skills and recognise the importance of moving from qualifications to skills, particularly given the low levels of basic skills among the adult population in Portugal. There is, however, a clear gap between formal

qualifications and the actual skills individuals possess.

At the same time, members express concern about an excessive focus on skills for the labour market, which risks neglecting other essential dimensions of adult learning. As APCEP put it:

Shifting from education and lifelong learning towards skills leaves behind urgent and essential purposes of adult education - such as democracy, basic skills, peace, solidarity, and support for vulnerable people.

The results of PIAAC confirm that Portugal needs policies that go far beyond the labour market and qualifications. The member stated:

Our democracies are at risk, human rights are not guaranteed, so adult education must be a space for resistance and transformation.

AI in adult learning

Members view artificial intelligence (AI) as a valuable tool to support teaching and learning. They emphasise the importance of enabling adults to understand AI - its applications, challenges, and benefits, through targeted learning opportunities. Training for educators, trainers, and staff working with adult learners is considered essential to ensure the safe and effective use of AI in educational settings.

While members acknowledge the growing role of digital technologies and AI tools, they also stress that human interaction and community engagement must remain at the heart of adult learning and education.

Participation in decision-making

Neither APCEP nor ESEC/IPC have participated in public consultations during this period. Members believe learners and civil society organisations do not have opportunities and space to participate in the decision-making process, and that their views and concerns are not always listened to or taken into account.

Portuguese members' view on the PIAAC results

Both organisations agree that the PIAAC results are representative of the situation in their country. Poor results were reported in Portugal, which was not a surprise to the members who work in the field. No attention was given to these results published late 2024, and no concrete response or policy guidelines were presented by the decision-makers.

Funding of adult education

According to APCEP and ESEC/IPC, the funding situation of adult education in Portugal has stayed the same in 2024-2025.

The member organisations mention multiple sources of funding, including:

- project funding
- programme funding
- operating grants/structural funding
- contributions paid by employers

According to the member, there is funding from Recovery and Resilience Plan (RFF) but it's not stable or sufficient.

Recommendation to the European Commission

APCEP and ESEC/IPC state that the European Union should strengthen its support for non-formal adult education and promote learning for democracy, citizenship, and human rights. Members reflect on the need for particular attention should be given to older learners, ensuring that European policies and recommendations to Member States reflect their needs and potential.

It is equally important to expand adult learning opportunities beyond large urban centres by promoting provision in rural and low-density areas where access to education remains limited. Promoting flexible learning pathways is essential to enable adults to engage in education throughout different life stages and circumstances.

At the same time, the EU should recognise and professionalise the role of adult educators, as many people currently working in this field come from other sectors without specific pedagogical training. Finally, European action should actively support forms of adult education that are cultural, social, and political, reinforcing the role of learning as a foundation for democracy and social cohesion across Europe.

Disclaimer on the participation in education and training data: the data used focuses on formal and non-formal education and training, excluding guided on-the-job training. Participation is higher when on-the-job training is included. Data coming from sources such as OECD and the monitoring framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights may differ from the presented data.