

Developments: More awareness needed about the benefits of non-formal education

According to EAEA members in Estonia, Association for Folk High Schools in Estonia (FHS), and Estonian Non-Formal Adult Education Association (ENAEA) the newly elected Estonian government seems to be open for adult education. The Ministry of Education and Research is preparing strategies for the next period (2021-2035) in the fields of education, research, youth, and language policy to utilize high-quality education and research & development systems to benefit people, society, and the economy of the country.

FHS explained that in general, the situation of adult learning and education in 2020 has remained the same as the previous year. ENAEAs view is that the situation has slightly worsened in Estonia compared to the previous year. The change is primarily the slightly reduced number of participants in lifelong learning. The participation rate in lifelong learning has fallen compared to 2019. In 2020 it was 17.1% and in 2019 it was 20.1%. Such a decrease can be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on all education providers. Major changes are yet to come, but there are expectations for the new adult education act, quality assessment, and personal learning pathway.

At the moment of the survey, FHS and EANEAs were not involved in the CONFINTEA VII process but might get involved in the future.

Conferences highlighting the benefits of adult learning

According to FHS, Estonian adults are not sufficiently aware of the need for further education and lifelong learning, even though participation rates have generally increased in recent years. FHS held a conference in September 2021 to make citizens and educators more aware of folk high schools and non-formal adult education.

One of the main takes from the conference was that ALE is not just private fun, it is the responsibility of all society, including the Government. Participation in non-formal education helps to reduce people's feelings of loneliness - an increasingly important topic during a pandemic. In addition to formal education, people must be offered opportunities to develop in areas that make them happy. It was pointed out that the benefits of liberal adult education are difficult to measure, but they are well understood - understanding the new and feeling pleased with the knowledge gained. Unmeasurable is often more important than easily measurable and profitable.

The mixed impact of COVID-19

According to ENAEA, the digital gap has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those that already had very good digital skills were able to continue learning, but those who did not have good digital skills dropped out of learning activities or had significant problems in following learning activities and demands. They remark that in rural areas, due to poor internet connection, lack of suitable devices, and low digital skills participants could not access or continue digital learning. An additional issue reported was also that not all educators had sufficient digital skills. Shift to online learning required also more training for the trainers.

FHS raises the fact that more people now have a better command of digital technologies, allowing them to access various digital learning activities, in that way, the digital gap has gotten smaller. Both organisations agree that outreach requires much more effort than before the pandemic. Unfortunately, due to lack of financial stability, most providers had to reduce the number of their personnel.

EAEAs Estonian members consider sustainability important, and they are considering plans, how to implement it better.

Challenges: No COVID-19 compensation for the adult learning sector

Our respondents say that changed funding for ALE has slightly or dramatically worsened the financing situation at all levels. At the moment, the ALE sector is under pressure, and funding for the non-formal learning sector is non-existent. Training centres and educators are looking for ways to survive. In essence, adult education activities are unfunded, and all activities are project-based. This was showcased when grants for damages due to the COVID-19 were distributed to other areas, adult education was forfeited.

The ministry of education and research funds only the ENAEA as policy designer in non-formal adult education area. Most of the organisations still rely on fees paid by, either by

participants or their employers, but even such funds have been significantly reduced. Some funds come from the Erasmus+ programme, which Estonian adult education sector actively participates in.

A shift to online learning had also directly impacted the financial costs of participants. While most providers had to pay less for course materials, investments had to be made to ensure a stable technological environment.

Looking forward

For 2022 FHS will focus on parents as their primary target group in co-operation with a program financed by the Ministry of Education and Research.

EANEA is focusing on ensuring that no more non-formal education training centres would be closed. Currently, they are negotiating with the government on the further development of the non-formal education field. There is an initiative to start a paradigm shift into the perception of non-formal education and showcase it as equally important in relation to formal education.
