

Need for more structural funding emerges in Austria

Although adult education and learning (ALE) is very well known and attended in Austria, it is not given enough political priority. The total funding, which comes from various sources, is insufficient to include all learners.

EAEAs members in Austria would like to see more stable and sustainable funding and a stronger political focus on ALE in general. European processes in ALE play an increasingly important role in developments at the regional and national levels in Austria.

Recovery in course participation, but financial challenges ahead

Overall, there has been a recovery in course participation since Covid-19. However, ALE providers and associations in Austria are facing several challenges that are linked to the different crises in recent years: EAEAs members notice an increase in conflicts in everyday course life. As a result of this trend, the Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres (VV), has put a stronger focus on the prevention of conflict and violence.

Uncertainty also exists both for participants and institutions, especially about the effects of inflation. ALE providers have to deal with higher personnel costs, energy costs, and rent increases. Adults are experiencing declining purchasing power, therefore, they have to weigh up whether they can afford to participate in a course or need to use their money for something else.

EAEA's members in Austria say that national and regional ALE policy primarily promotes ALE that meets the needs of the labour market. Although policy documents promote inclusive and accessible ALE, the sector sees a strong backlog in supporting ALE interventions that support social cohesion, democratic participation and well-being. Those areas of ALE that address current social challenges such as the green and digital transitions also require better funding and structural support.

The Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres (VV) points out that, despite insufficient funding levels, sustainability is one of its central focuses, including activities with learners and member organisations taking part in discussions. Another major topic that will take centre stage next year is democracy, as elections will be held in Austria and the EU in 2024.

Public funding is not sufficient for adult learning organisations

The funding situation for ALE in Austria has, according to EAEAs members, remained more or less the same since last year or has deteriorated slightly: this means that public funding from the EU or at the national and local level is still not sufficient for organisations working in ALE.

Several stable trends are emerging: In Austria, ALE is largely publicly financed from labour market funds. The proportion of funding from private households, i.e. learners, has also been increasing for years in comparison to funding of companies for continuing education. In addition, an increasing number of ALE agendas (integration, digitalisation) are moved from the Ministry of Education to other ministries and departments.

The share of ALE in the actual and "real" education budget is only 0.4%. In some areas, subsidies have been increased to compensate for inflation, particularly for non-profit ALEs (9.6% increase in salary costs alone). However, this does not alleviate the structural underfunding. One member sums up the financial situation very dramatically: "We have to constantly fight for the money and keep explaining to the government how important ALE is."

The increasing role of EU policy-making in ALE in a country with long regional and national ALE traditions

Austria has an ALE system with a long tradition that is well entrenched in society. However, EAEA's members state that learners do not have the tools to express their views and concerns to policymakers and actively participate in decision-making processes. As a result, the needs of learners are not sufficiently taken into account in policy-making processes. This also has an impact on the learning content and approaches offered. Similarly, civil society organisations in ALE do not have sufficient opportunities to express their views and concerns to political decision-makers and actively participate in political decision-making processes.

Both the VV and the Katholisches Erwachsenenbildungswerk were involved in consultations at various political levels last year. The Association of Catholic Adult Education contributed to the regional lifelong learning process in the Austrian federal state of Carinthia. The VV plays an important role at the national and European levels: it is part of the Conference of Adult Education Austria, which is the main point of contact of Austrian ALE for the relevant department in the Ministry of Education. The VV also took part in the EU "Making Skills Count" conference in June 2023.

Overall, the regional and national level plays a very strong role in shaping ALE policy in Austria, which means that processes such as the European Semester and the Country-Specific Recommendations are perceived as less important. On the other hand, EAEA's members state that, in the last year, they have been focusing more on Europe due to the European Year of Skills, and that European funding such as Erasmus+ and ESF+ is increasingly becoming a central funding instrument for Austrian ALE.

Key recommendations to improve ALE in Austria and the EU

- The recognition of ALE as an equal part of the education system through a modern ALE law.
- General (non-formal) and vocational ALE should be treated equally in terms of regulations and funding.
- 1% of the federal education budget should be for ALE. ALE should be financed through structural and long-term funding (instead of project funding and similar funding tools).
- All ALE provisions should be low-threshold, democratic, diverse, and inclusive, as well as promote sustainability in all its dimensions.
- ALE should be freely accessible, especially for the socially disadvantaged.
- A federal investment programme should support ALE in the area of digital equipment and outreach education formats.
- Nationwide educational programmes for sustainability, democracy, science education, and digitalisation should be implemented to close the digital and social divide in society.
- The EU should open up its ALE strategy beyond the focus on Individual Learning Accounts.

