

Developments: Great efforts to bring adult education through pandemic

The responses from EAEA's Austrian members and their sub-organisations give a mixed picture of the current situation of adult learning and education (ALE) in the country.

While especially large associations speak of a slight deterioration for adult education, smaller organisations experience rather the opposite - especially organisations that have already placed a strong emphasis on the topics of digitalisation and sustainability before. This also means that for some organisations funding was stable or slightly decreased, while other organisations saw an increase.

COVID-19: Rapid adaptation of learning programmes

The most important change last year was the digital push in the wake of the pandemic. All stakeholders and authorities have made great efforts to bring ALE well through the pandemic.

Adult education in Austria has generally moved very quickly to digital formats. Already at the beginning of April 2020, the Austrian Association of Adult Education Centres offered technical and didactic training online. There was a great demand for these further trainings: out of about 3,000 requests, places in the courses could be made available for about 1,500 trainers and educators at relatively short notice.

The association procured low-cost Zoom licences for their members, on the basis of

which most of the online courses could then be implemented. An Austria-wide working group defined the requirements for learning platforms, which were rolled out to all members. In addition, a repository was set up from which learning tools and materials - mostly in the form of Open Educational Resources - can be accessed.

During the second lockdown, ALE providers had to switch to digital or hybrid learning, depending on the type of learning programmes offered, and only some programmes could continue to be delivered face-to-face.

The Adult Education Centres have managed to implement online around 15 percent of what was offered before the pandemic. New target groups have also been reached: people with care obligations, irregular working hours or with long journeys to the nearest educational institution.

Decline in participation rates

Despite the new target groups, the numbers of participants in ALE in 2020/2021 show a very clear decline. Non-formal adult learning and education was particularly affected by the closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also in vocational adult education, there were significant declines in participation in face-to-face courses. The current statistics of the Conference for Austrian Adult Education (KEB) show a decline of about 30 percent.

Programmes in second-chance education could be conducted in face-to-face formats when distance learning was not possible. Some non-formal programmes with a focus on social skills, communication skills, culture, etc. had to pause or stop completely. Spreading the offer into virtual, hybrid and face-to-face learning was a challenge for all ALE organisations and providers.

The pandemic also had an impact on outreach work. Due to the necessary changes in

outreach work, new partnerships were established. Reaching the target groups was often a particular challenge.

The pandemic has also confronted Austrian ALE with a shortage of qualified course instructors, which now also affects the major cities. This is being tackled through increased investment in train-the-trainer programmes.

Funding subsidies from government

The funding situation has, according to most respondents, stayed the same in the last few years. However, some members noted that they have seen an increase in project funding and another organisation said that the pandemic led to more funding through higher public subsidies and participant fees.

ALE in Austria is financed through a great variety of funding instruments. This includes project and programme funding, structural funding for the learning providers to maintain their work, fees paid by individuals or employers, vouchers and individual learning accounts.

From an economic point of view, ALE in Austria largely weathered the pandemic well, as numerous subsidies were made available by the federal government. In particular, the non-profit hardship fund could be used by a large part of Austrias adult education organisations and providers.

In addition, several institutions have introduced the model of short-time work, which is also supported by public funds. Organisations also noted that the cost of learning provision increased during the pandemic due to the need to invest in the technological environment. Some organisations had to hire additional technical support staff and adult educators specialised in online learning or invest in teacher training programmes.

Policy developments

According to EAEAs members, especially larger umbrella associations are involved to a certain extent in the design and implementation of policies and strategies, for example through consultations., Smaller associations and organisations working at the grass-roots level are rarely consulted.

There is a relatively large number of policies and strategies affecting adult education in Austria:

- Safeguarding the structures of Austrian adult education: performance contracts with the federal associations of non-profit adult education
- In the area of upskilling and permeability: the Adult Education Initiative with the two programmes basic education and compulsory school leaving certificate
- Second-chance education measures such as the Berufsreifeprüfung and the Studienberechtigungsprüfung. These are examinations that enable university and college admission
- National Qualifications Framework, which already includes several non-formal qualifications
- Validation strategy, which now seems to be gaining momentum again
- The Educational guidance initiative to improve access to adult education and LLL in all provinces
- Individual CET funding in various forms to improve quality and professionalisation: AT-Cert, the quality seal for Austrian adult education
- CET academy to validate the competences of adult educators
- In the field of digitalisation: digitalisation with the EB-MOOC, the Democracy-MOOC and other activities
- Numerous labour market policy measures and activities

The National Strategy for Financial Literacy in Austria outlines a framework that will guide the actions of stakeholders over the next five years. It establishes a governance structure and decision-making processes and sets policy priorities. Its goal is to improve the financial well-being of people living in Austria. The strategy is in line with the OECD Council Recommendation on Financial Literacy, adopted by OECD governments at the October 2020 Ministerial Meeting, together with the measures to support a strong, resilient, inclusive and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

Cooperation between adult education and other sectors

The current amendment to the Universities Act, which came into force on 1 October 2021, aims to increase cooperation between universities and adult education. Credits from the non-formal and informal sector become possible. After validation of learning outcomes, other vocational or non-vocational qualifications can be recognised up to a certain maximum level. In addition, the university can recognise vocational and non-vocational qualifications.

In spring 2021, the province of Vienna joined the Austrian Society for Civic Education. This means that all federal provinces are now members of the society, which offers further education events on civic education and promotes civic education projects. The Society for Civic Education is financed in equal parts by the federal countries and the federal government.

CONFINTEA

In Austria, the ALE associations are not yet involved in the CONFINTEA process, but VV aims to participate in this process. Representatives of the Austrian ALE associations have

not been invited to join the national CONFINTEA VII delegation.

Challenges: Digitalisation and sustainability in focus

Social and environmental sustainability play a major role in Austrian adult learning associations. Some organisations already have strategies to promote sustainability in their learning programmes in place, others are currently working on them. Some say they would need more guidance on how to do this. Austrian members say that there is still space for a better implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the ALE sector. Hence, at the national level, there are plans to develop an SDG strategy for the ALE sector, i.e. a guiding document for all ALE associations and providers in Austria.

The working group Transformative Learning of the Austrian UNESCO Commission deals with the implementation of SDG 4. VV, the Austrian Association of Adult Education Centres, is a member of this working group and thus helps to shape this area. In addition, contact has been established with NGOs that deal with the implementation of the SDGs. Within the framework of a VV working group, good practice examples are being collected with the representatives of their members and a strategy is being worked on.

Adult Education Centres have a long tradition in the field of sustainability. For example, environmental counselling has been around for 33 years. The model was developed in

cooperation with the Adult Education Centres and the VHS is still the provider of environmental counselling today. In addition, some Adult Education Centres have been certified for eco-labels.

Recommendations to policymakers

Austrian adult education organisations argue that it is increasingly necessary to communicate about non-formal adult education and its value. What is special about non-formal adult education, what do politics and society gain from it? EAEAs members say that the answer is simple: ALE is very effective, it is also very flexible and relatively inexpensive, compared to other political measures.

They also emphasise that not only learning job-related skills is important. People also need to be reached with topics such as democracy, human rights, communication, learning from our history, team building, etc.

Although the situation of adult education in Austria is still relatively "privileged" compared to other countries, education providers would nevertheless like to see better and more long-term funding that would enable them to invest, for example, in digitalisation or teacher training. They would get more project-independent public funding that requires less bureaucracy. Smaller organisations find the administration of public funding too burdensome.

Looking forward

The priority topics of EAEAs Austrian members for 2022 include digitalisation, in particular the continuation of the implementation of the new digitalisation strategy. The Austrian adult education associations also want to involve older people more actively in the programmes of the adult education associations and are developing a strategy for

this together with their network partners.

Another focus will be health, for which the adult education associations are planning to develop a competence framework for health educators and a validation procedure.

Sustainable working and learning and the promotion and conservation of biodiversity will also be a priority for some organisations. Finally, the recruitment of new trainers and educators will also be on agenda in 2022. Validation processes will be strengthened and expanded to recruit competent teachers.
