

Developments: Ambitious new program for adult education

In Austria two of the members have responded to this year's survey: **The Association of Austrian Adult Education Centers (VV)** is the coordination center for the federal and regional associations with over 270 adult education centers, while **ARG Bildungshuser (ARGE)** is a network of 20 educational centres.

In autumn 2019 a new government program was published that includes numerous projects designed to strengthen lifelong learning in the education system and supports the more vulnerable parts of the population. This came into play after the Austrian Parliament revoked some measures of the previous right-wing conservative government and reintroduced measures for older unemployed people. The program will revise the legal foundations, adjust the strategic orientation of adult education and improve its management. Another major pillar of the program is the validation strategy, which recognises adult education as an integral part of the Austrian Lifelong Learning Strategy. The program will also include a voucher system and financing tools for continuing education. The vouchers are targeted at women returning to work and the long-term unemployed and seek to foster entrepreneurship skills and financial literacy. Civil society organisations acknowledge that the program is a positive development to strengthen Austrian democracy.

Alongside the ambitious program, there are some new projects for the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways strategy. Regarding the Sustainable Development Goals, Austria has a range of initiatives that push for sustainable development across civil society. The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) has been implemented in some areas, but VV has not been consulted in the process. ARGE, however, was involved in a civil

society consultation. Both organisations believe that the Pillar is an important policy for Austria.

Challenges: The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in Austria

The COVID-19 crisis has been the definite challenge of the last year. It has brought many providers closer to bankruptcy. It has also revealed that digital learning and access to adult education is less accessible for people who are socially and geographically disadvantaged.

ARGE reported that all of their organisations had to close and re-design their courses to accommodate online learning and new forms of face to face education. While ARGE did relatively well in the pandemic, many of its member organisations are close to bankruptcy, had to stop their activities and fire some of their staff. Corona has been a massive challenge for so-called "Bildungshuser", who are living from the pedagogical concept of "learning and living under one roof". EAEAs member reports that most people in the sector are not enthusiastic about digital learning provision. Another major challenge is that less advantaged parts of the population, such as migrants and people in rural locations continue to have limited access to digital tools.

More investment is needed on the digital infrastructure

Corona has revealed that organisations financed by a mix of public funds and participant fees are particularly vulnerable and, in some cases, in danger of bankruptcy. The crisis brought an enormous digitalisation push, which was well received by the public. The scepticism against digitally enhanced education quickly gave way, and more training opportunities for instructors were introduced. At the same time online education led to exclusion and widened the digital divide, which is essentially a social one that discriminates based on social and geographical disadvantages.

It is therefore an urgent task to expand broadband Internet throughout Austria and make it accessible to all households and educational institutions in all regions. Affordable internet and an exemption from internet fees would be a worthwhile consideration, analogous to the exemption from broadcasting fees. Finally, access to inexpensive electronic devices must also be ensured. In order to fulfill the educational policy mandate of providing affordable education for all, ongoing costs must be minimized. This also includes the costs for software licenses. In a COVID-19 driven initiative, the costs for some of these expenditures (free access to Office and an online education platform) were covered by the Ministry of Education. The civil society sector hopes that in the future more investments will be allocated to open learning materials to widen the access even further.

Access and inclusion as focus areas

The corona crisis has not only shown the digital divide but also highlighted how many people are excluded from adult learning in the first place. At a moment in time, when democratic institutions in Austria are questioned, life-long and life-wide adult education is as crucial as ever. Therefore, one of the main challenges for VV for the next year will be widening access and inclusion in adult learning. For the next year the focus of VV will be on financing adult learning, supporting older learners and investing in inclusion practices. Furthermore, they seek to promote learning for democracy and social

cohesion. The focus at ARGE will be to widen citizen participation in the region and support the existing facilities financially and with personnel. Overall, adult education in Austria can still be strengthened and should receive more recognition across society.
