Adult education trends in 2020

Although the situation of adult education is fundamentally dependent on the respective country, there are some trends that can be witnessed across Europe.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an overarching topic across countries, as it forced some adult learning and education providers to close their doors, but also enabled others to accelerate their transition to digital learning.

A year of closing programs and unexpected new beginnings

There have been no major shifts in the past year in adult education policies, as many countries have run strategies and programs until 2020 and have yet to decide on the priorities of the upcoming year. Nevertheless, some countries reported that the adult education sector was supported by some emergency policies and funding opportunities that were put in place to deal with the consequences of the pandemic.

Adapting to crisis: mapping future
2020 was a year of rapid adaptation. The long foreseen but slow move into digital learning was suddenly accelerated to ensure the provision of learning in the first place. The pandemic led many organisations to apply changes to their work programs and acquaint learners with new types of learning formats. The drastic change revealed the lack of digital infrastructure and skills across Europe and once again demonstrated that many adults are missing basic and life skills. While health literacy and critical thinking became a priority during the crisis, many adults were educationally alienated by a lack of financial means or competing priorities, especially those from a lower socio-economic background, the unemployed, low skilled and minority groups. Evidence shows that outreach and access have been dramatically complicated by the crisis.

2020 Policy Trends

In a year dominated by adaptation to the COVID crisis, many of EAEA members centered their work around local policies and projects, supporting learners on the ground. Only a few organisations were consulted on the European Pillar of Social Rights and often its implementation was not directly witnessed by EAEA members. Upskilling Pathways continued but has not been mentioned by adult education organisations and providers as a political priority during the last year. Both examples show that visibility is key to ensure that European policies are known, recognised and referred to on the local level. The Sustainable Development Goals, on the other hand, continue to have an important role, as they are increasingly interlinked with local and national policy frameworks.

A need for recognition (and elevated financing)

EAEA members across Europe repeatedly reported cuts in funding and depicted the
financial difficulties that many of their learners faced, due to the COVID-19 crisis. In some cases organisations had to terminate employment contracts of their staff or completely close their provision. Emergency funds were only available in some cases and mainly directed at employment-directed training courses, leaving the non-formal learning sector behind. One major obstacle of financing is the lack of recognition of non-formal adult learning. Subsequently, validation schemes are perceived as an opportunity not only to support the sector financially, but also to increase participation and access for those with competing priorities.

A demand to enhance the voice of civil society

Involvement of civil society is entirely subject to the country. There is no visible trend in terms of heightened involvement of civil society or new opportunities for involvement throughout COVID. In some cases governments consulted civil society groups in their emergency response plans, preparing the way for more recognition and hence, funding. Many organisations would recommend their government to establish closer ties with civil society.

It is clear that adequate, widely accessible and quality adult education should be a priority for governments coping with the consequences of the crisis. It is no longer a secret that citizens demand governments to prioritise investment in adult learning. (CEDEFOP survey 10.11.2020) The country reports are herewith, not only a window into the experience of European adult education providers, but also a call to action to make lifelong learning a reality for all.
EAEA is proud to present the 2020 country reports and therewith offer a civil society perspective on the state of adult education in Europe.

As announced in 2019, we will publish the country reports in digital format from now on. This step towards the digital presentation does not only allow us to continuously develop on the data; but it also enables users to find and compare information through thematic tags, enhancing accessibility for all.

2020s country reports are based on responses from 44 members across 31 countries and depict the diversity of experience across the European adult learning and education sector. (The survey was conducted during summer/autumn 2020, so the responses reflect time from mid-year 2019 to mid-year 2020.) While the reports offer valuable contributions in the way they shed light on country specific situations and opportunities, it is important to mention that the data presented is subjective and based on data collection through a survey. The country reports highlight the importance of qualitative data, in addition to the quantitative data that surveys like the Labor Force Survey and the Adult Education Survey provide.
EAEAs country reports give a voice to civil society organisations and grass-roots movements at the European stage. The country reports open a window of individual experiences and serve to inform adult education stakeholders across Europe, enabling actors to compare the developments and inspire providers and policy makers with innovative practices and ambitious policy reforms.

Facing the challenges of the global pandemic, adult education providers across Europe have struggled throughout the last year but also shown resilience and commitment to adult education. The crisis exacerbated existing forms of inequality, but also drew attention to the pressing needs of our time: equitable access to and free provision of healthcare and education, ensuring everyone has basic digital skills. Many societies realised the importance of adult education in paving the way for critical thinking, health literacy and preparing the grounds for socially cohesive learning communities, which are essential to cope with the consequences of any major crisis.

Find out about adult education trends in 2020

***

Please note that we are still developing the website, and adding new functionalities to it. Also, more thematic tags will be added to the texts describing adult education situation in different countries.
We are proud to present to you the sixth edition of our country reports - now in digital format.

Since 2014 EAEA has been collecting outlooks from across our members in Europe on the adult education sector: recent developments, strengths, challenges and how policy in their country reflecting international policies and initiatives relating to adult learning at present.

It is important that we begin by making clear- this is a civil society perspective; the country reports are not a scientific analysis of data. The information we present is collected through surveys sent to all EAEA members which they use to express their views about the sector in their country. The views represented, therefore, may vary dependent on our members focus group, geographical position, the level on which they operate, and the extent of consultation they conducted before they responded to the survey.

This report offers professionals in adult education across Europe an opportunity to
express their perspectives, relay learners views, and look to the future: providing
recommendations, predicting future challenges, and expressing their plans for the
upcoming year. It bridges the gap between citizens involved in adult education at a
grassroots level, governing bodies, and institutions writing policy.

Many of our contributors noted this year that in the future they hoped their governing
structures would put less of an emphasis on adult learning from employment, or
vocational training as the most important forms of adult education, also giving
recognition (and vitally, funding) to learning programmes for citizenship, personal
development and well-being.

Another challenge facing many of the civil society representatives in Europe is
encouraging participation from those without a strong background in education.
Outreach is difficult, and breaking down the stigmas they may attach to lifelong learning
is a complex process.

From here on in, we are going digital. The 2019 edition, and each one following on from
that will instead be added to our country reports database. There are a number of
benefits to our new digital system. In the future editions you will be able to effortlessly
compare situations and initiatives from multiple different countries. Instead of having to
flip between pages of our physical copies, and you will be able to explore the changes in
adult education over the last number of years, in one country, or many. The data will
remain much the same: a civil society view, but presented in a more innovative and
accessible way

Gina Ebner, Secretary General of EAEA
Uwe Gartenschlaeger, President of EAEA
How to use the country reports?

The country reports are an opportunity to compare the current situation of adult education in different countries. They also provide new insights and information for advocacy work.

The country reports are based on a survey sent to EAEAs members, asking them about the state of adult education in their country. The views expressed are thus dependent upon our members contexts, outlooks and focus: many of our members are umbrella organisation for example, representing providers, others may engage in research or policy advocacy and some work on a local level as adult education providers. As such their survey responses can provide a very specific view, or experience, of adult educations status and role in their area or country.

We didn't receive replies for the 2019 survey from some countries (Italy, Latvia, Moldova, Russia, Serbia, UK) so those webpages have no information at the moment.

Our members can use the survey as an opportunity to share their experience
throughout their work in the field, as well as this they are able to consult providers and organisations within their networks to gather and reflect their views. Some country reports are based upon one member: this can mean that their report reflects the geographic reach of their work, dependent on the level on which they operate (as a national institution, NGO umbrella organisation, or as a regional or local provider for example), and the extent of consultation they conducted in order to formulate their response to the survey.

Adult education trends in 2019

Based on the country reports, what are the current trends and policies of European adult education? In the 2019 country report survey, EAEA asked members to reply to questions about several European policies.

European Agenda

While only two of our participating members (Greece and Georgia) explicitly mentioned using the European Agenda for Adult Learning as a guideline for changes in the sector there is evidence of its influence in a number of countries. For example, a vast majority of our members noted the importance of flexibility in adult education provision, and many noted examples of policy makers or governing bodies beginning to recognise this
as well. Innovative approaches to provision and engagement were also noted by a
number of respondents.

Sustainable Development Goals,
United Nations

Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is occurring, albeit in
varying degrees, across Europe. Our survey encouraged members to discuss their
countrys relationship with the goals. Despite some members relaying that their policy
makers were designing strategies that responded to the goals, but that it was not
directly mentioned, most responses noted that the SDGs were reflected in their country.
Some countries even went beyond goal 4 (providing inclusive and quality education for
all). Our Croatian member, for example, is working to promote the SDGs on a wider
scale. In Slovenia our members are working to implement goal 10 (reducing inequalities)
through adult education for vulnerable groups. In Switzerland there is a Strategy in place
directly relating to all 17 of the goals.

Upskilling Pathways

The Upskilling Pathways initiative had a mixed uptake: some of our members reported
that it formed the basis of most of their countrys policy at present, while others noted
that it was not being explicitly implemented at all. A number of members did mention
the presence of the values of the initiative being present in their local adult education
sphere, through the work of civil society organisations or our members themselves.

Involvement of civil society

Our Norwegian and Irish members noted that civil society organisations (CSOs) in their
respective countries were being provided with the opportunity to involve themselves in the designing of policy and strategies relating to adult education. This is excellent for CSOs in these contexts, however, other members called for greater civil society engagement, recognising the extent to which these organisations can play a role in advocating for adult learners. In the Netherlands, Erasmus + funding has allowed civil society's capacity to increase. Our member also notes how collaboration between civil society organisations from different contexts can help further develop effective systems of support for vulnerable learners.

Validation

Especially when working with vulnerable adults, validation of learning was clearly a priority for many of our members. Vocational Education and Training (VET) was mentioned explicitly by a number of members who feel that without appropriate certification for VET learners moving back into employment (or seeking better employment opportunities) is less likely. However, recognition for trainers in the sector (professionalization) was also recognised as a key issue in adult education at present.

Engaging new learners

It is recognised within the adult education sector that those who need it most, often have very limited access to learning. The European Commission has coined the term low-skilled trap: where those with low-skills or low levels of qualification are often in jobs where they are not provided with training. They are also less likely to seek out or participate in learning opportunities outside the workplace due to negative experiences and stigma. Our members are developing a number of innovative approaches to dealing with the difficulties involved in encouraging worse-represented groups to participate in adult education. However, many of them still saw it as a major challenge facing the field.