Adult education centres generate social and economic added value

Austria shows stagnant participation rates in adult learning. The participation rates have slightly decreased since 2016, and the level of basic skills among the adult population has decreased as well. Outreach remains an issue, as adults with no or low qualifications, persons outside the labour force and older workers show even lower participation rates. Funding remains largely tied to active labour market measures and job-specific adult education.

According to EAEA's member, Verband sterreichischer Volkshochschulen (VV), the Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres, certain measures have been implemented, such as Bildungskarenz (unpaid educational leave) supplemented with a financial allowance, the programme Level Up- Erwachsenenbildung, which focuses on increasing basic skills, Funding for reskilling and upskilling and one stop shop for guidance to upskill and reskill people with no or few qualifications. The latest European Semester report for Austria recommends increasing the number of offers of tailored adult education measures and supporting further German language learning.

Skills dimension

Adult learning has many purposes, such as supporting individuals in living meaningful and self-determined lives. It also addresses the everyday issues and needs of adults and thus simultaneously generates social and economic added value.

As VV explains:

"We are adult education centres, whose work is fundamentally based on the question of which skills people need to be able to lead a good life in this world and thus also in the existing economic system in a self-determined manner. Nevertheless, adult education work also strengthens skills that are becoming increasingly important for the economy and are now often summarised under the term transversal skills. This refers to cross-sectional competences that enable people to deal with all kinds of life situations, e.g. problem-solving skills, but also communication and creativity."

VV continues:

"Adult learning spaces have always been places of social learning, communication and development. Here, for example, you learn to work as part of a team and therefore always as part of a team. The broad educational approach of adult education centres also addresses the everyday issues and needs of participants and thus simultaneously generates social and economic added value: for example, being and staying healthy and fit, breaking through monolingualism and learning about the benefits of multilingualism, as well as distinguishing between fake news and facts."

Participation in decision-making

VV has declared that there is regular dialogue at the national level with the responsible department in the ministry. At the regional level, there are opportunities of engagement with the relevant public authorities and stakeholders.

Austrian member's view on the PIAAC

results

According to the PIAAC results published in 2024, almost one in three adults in Austria face serious reading difficulties in everyday life, an increase of around 700.000 people since the last survey. The majority of those affected were born in Austria or have German as their first language.

Although adult learning participation is relatively high (52.2% vs. 39.5% EU average), access remains highly unequal. According to calculations by Statistics Austria, only 6.6% of adults aged 25- 64 who currently participate in extracurricular education related to work (e.g. personnel training or a language course) have at most a compulsory school leaving certificate.

In light of the new PIAAC findings, a stronger coordination of federal strategies to widen participation would be highly relevant. The national Level Up basic education programme - mainly delivered by adult education centres - shows high completion rates, positive educational effects, but also an increasing need for programmes. Providers continue to face heavy administrative burdens, especially in the area of documentation, uncertain project-based funding, and limited funding and awareness-raising measures. A joint effort by all stakeholders that firmly establishes the programme in federal education policy is crucial.

Funding of adult education

According to VV, the funding situation of adult education in Austria has stayed the same in 2024-2025.

The member organisation mentions multiple sources of funding, including:

- fees from participants
- labour market service
- project funding
- programme funding
- contribution paid by employers
- ILA (different on regional level)
- training vouchers for employees (different on regional level)

Recommendation to the European Commission

VOV recommends that funding should be spent on genuine innovation or measures in the area of adult learning and education that take into account criteria such as democratic participation of learners.

Disclaimer on the participation in education and training data: the data used focuses on formal and non-formal education and training, excluding guided on-the-job training. Participation is higher when on-the-job training is included. Data coming from sources such as OECD and the monitoring framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights may differ from the presented data.