Limited space for learners and civil society to shape adult education in Belgium

Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in French-speaking Belgium is marked by a combination of positive and challenging aspects: while policy-makers recognise the importance of ALE, ALE organisations feel that opportunities for both civil society and learners to express their views and concerns and engage in policy-making processes are limited.

EAEAs member says that there have been no significant policy changes in ALE in 2022/2023, and the overall situation is reported to have remained the same as the previous year. Policy-makers in French-speaking Belgium recognise the importance of ALE, particularly in addressing labour market needs and fostering social cohesion. However, policies do not adequately support the promotion of ALE to respond to societal challenges such as digital and green transitions.

The primary focus of ALE in French-speaking Belgium is still closely tied to labour market needs. There is a distinct emphasis on digital access and literacy training, with a unique approach where literacy programmes receive support not only from unemployment funds but also from cultural funds.

ALE in French-speaking Belgium is primarily financed through project funding, programme funding, and operating grants/structural funding. Notably, the ESF+ (European Social Fund) also contributes significantly to funding. However, there are concerns regarding the sufficiency of funding from EU funding instruments, public sources at the regional and national levels, and funding through companies. Most notably, ALE providers believe that ALE is not affordable and accessible enough for the

adult population and that more needs to be done to eliminate financial barriers to learning.

ALE providers note that learners have insufficient possibilities to express their views and concerns to policymakers. Similarly, civil society organisations feel their opportunities to engage in policy-making processes are limited. Despite contributing to several consultations, overall possibilities for participation are described as insufficient. For example, organisations in French-speaking Belgium would like to engage in the regional implementation process of CONFINTEA VII, but report that they have not been invited to participate and experience difficulties in gaining access to the relevant bodies.

Awareness of initiatives such as the European Year of Skills among the general population is considered to be low; however, ALE organisations are generally aware of European funding instruments such as Erasmus+ and ESF+. At the same time, the capacity to apply for Erasmus+ funding is seen as limited. This could be explained by the language barrier with English as the lingua franca in a large proportion of Erasmus+ projects.

To enhance ALE in the region, the following recommendations are made:

- Ensure the accessibility of literacy training for everyone, irrespective of their personal and professional situation.
- Adapt administrative rules to keep ESF+ accessible for smaller organisations.
- Prioritise literacy in ESF+ to maintain it as a focal point in the policy narrative.