

COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Action Plan on Adult Learning: Achievements and results 2008-2010

Summary

The Staff Working Document presents a review of the progress made since September 2007 when the Action Plan on Adult Learning: *It is always a good time to learn*¹ was adopted by the European Commission. The Action Plan defined five concrete actions which the European Commission and Member States should seek to implement in order to increase participation in and quality of adult learning and develop efficient systems that reach all adults and involve all relevant stakeholders.

Structured EU level cooperation on adult learning

The Action Plan on Adult Learning provided for the first time a set of common priorities to be encouraged in the adult learning sector and initiated intensified European cooperation between its diverse actors within the framework of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

Both the Action Plan and the Council Conclusions that endorsed it focused on disadvantaged groups such as low skilled, early school leavers and migrants.

A range of actions has taken place at EU level to support development in the areas identified for action, including Europe-wide surveys, studies, conferences, meetings, and workshops. To steer the process, the Adult Learning Working Group (ALWG) was established. The Action Plan has been instrumental in cultivating transnational cooperation around topics of common concern. The main vehicle was a series of Peer Learning Activities (PLAs) which provided an opportunity for participating countries to discuss challenges and successes, contrast approaches, compare progress and exchange good practice on a range of topics, with a view to developing or enhancing their own systems. The combined results have generated a wealth of knowledge to be shared by countries.

Grundtvig, and the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) more generally, provides direct support. Grundtvig is a test-bed for innovative solutions in some priority areas: quality of provision both formal and non-formal; teaching and learning methods, staff mobility; enhancing learning for disadvantaged groups, including skills development, social inclusion, active citizenship and active ageing. Leonardo da Vinci provides a similar service with regard to work-based learning and continuing vocational training (C-VET).

The Action Plan has been helpful in raising awareness of adult learning and giving it visibility and priority as part of education policy. Consensus building, policy learning and exchange of good practices have been the Action Plan's main contribution to adult learning in Europe so far. Hence it provides a useful reference for the definition of national strategies.

The following summarises achievements and results achieved on each priority:

¹ COM (2007) 558 final: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2007:0558:FIN:EN:PDF>

Analyse the effects of reforms in all sectors of education and training in Member States on adult learning

Studies undertaken on this priority show that policy reforms are being driven by lifelong learning strategies that include adult learning, but their implementation remains a critical challenge. Coherent and comprehensive strategies covering the full life-course are still not the norm, with some still focusing on specific sectors or groups; hence access for adults throughout life is still not a reality. Adult participation in learning in the majority of countries remains low, and in fact since 2005 there has been a slight annual decrease in overall EU participation. One of the main obstacles is funding and, despite the fact that it was identified by the Action Plan and the Council as a high priority, analysis of the distribution of resources or of the cost/benefits of adult learning has not yet been done at European level. Lack of monitoring and impact assessment of reforms deprives adult learning of a strong evidence base.

VET reforms associated with the Copenhagen process impact on adult learning in that they cover continuing training for work purposes. Moreover, changes to enable more adult participation in higher education are supported by the Bologna process and the Commission's modernisation of higher education agenda, but progress remains slow.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the development of national qualifications frameworks and systems (NQFs) provide an opportunity for redesigning systems, and place qualifications available through adult learning, including validation of non-formal and informal learning, in a common qualification structure, on a par with other qualifications. NQFs and EQF encourage the use of other common tools, like key competences, quality assurance, credit transfer systems, etc. also in adult learning. It is work in progress that needs to be continued, especially to ensure that non-formal and non-regulated education, which often characterises adult learning, is included in national frameworks.

Improve the quality of provision in the adult learning sector

The completed research shows that the status of the adult learning professional as an independent profession has not yet been established in most countries. However, training of teachers and trainers, including adult learning professionals is high on the agenda at national level. Though provision still varies greatly between initial, continuing and in-service training, there is progressive expansion of the number of qualified staff in this sector. It should extend to all countries. A study on key competences for adult learning professionals proposes a set of competences for staff, both professionals and managerial, which could serve as a useful reference for Member States and stakeholders alike, in developing their staff.

In a number of countries, good practice in accrediting and assuring quality of providers has been identified. Further research required on standards and quality criteria for providers remains to be done. Gradually, EQAVET will be implemented in the adult vocational education sector. Work is also being undertaken to see how this fits with the European Standards and Guidelines on quality assurance in higher education. The question remains how best to exploit

these tools to support quality in the remaining area of non-vocational adult learning, which is often characterised by many small organisations providing non-formal learning. Such bodies would benefit from an overarching quality framework for LLL, which might incorporate simple guidelines to raise quality standards.

To date, work has involved mainly researchers and policy makers. This could usefully be complemented with a bottom up element involving the opinion of three critical players – practitioners, providers and the learners themselves.

Increase the possibilities for adults to achieve a qualification at least one level higher ('go one-step-up')

The Action Plan required a number of products and these have been achieved, resulting in a study, an inventory of good practices, several PLA reports and guidelines for policy and practice, which provide a strong data resource to support the continued development of basic skills and second chance provision.

Countries have started to develop outreach and effective solutions to the challenge of up-skilling, providing much effective practice and knowhow to share. It shows that they are aware of the importance of basic skills, starting with literacy and numeracy. The most urgent problem is that the initiatives are only touching the tip of the iceberg. Taking the qualifications of the 76 million low skilled “one step up” calls for outreach and opportunities for much larger numbers and target groups. The study recommends that countries develop their own action plans on basic skills at local and regional level.

To reach low-skilled adults it is essential to transform their life and work environments into places of learning; embedding learning of basic skills at the workplace is a successful approach to reaching and engaging low-skilled workers. Furthermore, the pathway of low-skilled (low-qualified) adults is one of dipping in and dipping out. Guidance and the very best teachers should accompany every stage of the learning journey to help them persist and eventually reach their goal.

Second chance is more critical than ever as significant flows of early school leavers continue to join the ranks of the low skilled. While literacy and numeracy provide a foundation for new skills for jobs, developing new skills needed by adults in modern society: digital skills, economic and financial literacy, civic, cultural and environmental awareness, healthy living, etc. also merit significant attention.

Speed up the process of assessing and recognising non-formal and informal learning for the disadvantaged groups

The Action Plan's objective to identify and exchange good practices has been achieved and the results are being disseminated and exploited extensively. Validation of prior learning can and does work in developing the qualifications of disadvantaged groups, but it is not often part of the learning opportunity given them. The European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning shows that while great strides are being made in developing validation processes,

overall take up is low and the low skilled, older workers and migrants targeted by the Action Plan are not their primary beneficiaries. It is only in France, the Netherlands, Portugal and some Nordic countries that it is a more widely accessible option.

Validation towards certification is also developing in companies and in the voluntary and youth sectors, as well as for access to universities and higher education. The learning culture needs to change to achieve acceptance of and trust in validation as the norm, and on an equal footing with formal learning in the years to come. Local information, guidance and employment services must be more proactive in promoting validation. The importance of non-formal and informal learning in the case of adult participation is supported by empirical evidence from the Adult Education Survey (AES).

The Commission in its Communication on an Agenda for new skills and jobs² makes a case for continuing work on validation, supported by a Council Recommendation. A proposal is currently being prepared.

Improve the monitoring of the adult learning sector

The deliverables requested by the Action plan were furnished in the form of a glossary and study that identified core data required to monitor the sector effectively, and these are providing valuable input to debate and further planning. Some progress has been achieved at European level but national, regional and micro data are necessary. We do not have enough information to enable evidence-based policy making to grow at national level, alongside a reliable system of comparable data at EU level. Data are required on the amount of the education budget spent on adult learning and who invests, who learns and for how long and with what results, on the type of learning undertaken, and on the benefits and impact of adult learning in order to feed this information back into reforms. Much of the good practice being exchanged in the Open Method of Coordination is more innovative practice that has not yet been through impact assessment, which would enhance the already useful learning that this process stimulates.

A series of documents testifying to the wealth of activities carried out to implement the Action Plan is available at:
<http://www.kslll.net/PeerLearningClusters/clusterDetails.cfm?id=7> and
http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc58_en.htm

² COM (2010) 682 final, Strasbourg, 23.11.2010