THE ADULT LEARNING CHALLENGE

To thrive in a fast-changing world, everyone needs a wide range of knowledge and skills – and to keep developing them throughout life. This is a key message of the New Skills Agenda for Europe [see box]. Without the right skills, many find themselves working in poor quality jobs, unemployed or under-qualified for a new generation of employment opportunities. Without basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills, everyday life can be a challenge.

The challenge – set out in the European Agenda for Adult Learning [see box] – is to encourage more adults to return to learning. To accomplish this, the EU and Member States have adopted a diverse array of strategies and policy initiatives aimed at improving the availability and overall quality, quantity and accessibility of adult learning opportunities. In addition, steps are being taken to increase the up-take of these opportunities through effective outreach, guidance and motivation strategies targeting the groups most in need.

However, despite these efforts, statistics show that:

- only one out of every 10 European adults takes part in some form of education or training
- more than a quarter of all adults lack the basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills that many of today’s jobs require.

So how can adult learning policies and provision be made more effective?

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

A study recently commissioned by the European Commission, “An in-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe”, reviewed the available evidence. It confirms that although adult learning brings significant economic and social benefits to individuals, companies and society in general, only a very few European adults access opportunities.

The study also highlights ways to make policies more effective, thereby increasing adult participation in learning. Based on its findings, the study identifies six crucial factors for increasing participation in adult learning and skills development opportunities.
SIX STEPS TOWARDS MORE EFFECTIVE ADULT LEARNING POLICIES

1. INCREASE ADULTS’ WILLINGNESS TO TAKE PART IN, AND THEIR POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS, LEARNING

Participation and retention are dependent on adult learning having a positive reputation and on individual learners being well-disposed towards it. To ensure that this is the case, Member States can work with social partners and other stakeholders to raise awareness about the many benefits of adult learning, to reach out to adults who would most benefit from it, and provide them with tailored information and guidance.

2. ENCOURAGE EMPLOYER INVESTMENT IN ADULT LEARNING

As job requirements evolve, employees must develop their existing skills and talents – along with acquiring new ones. For this reason, professional development and job-related training are key factors that can motivate adults to return to learning. Ensuring that employers invest in adult learning is essential for increasing both the range of opportunities available and the number of employees taking part in learning.

3. ENHANCE ACCESS TO LEARNING FOR DISADVANTAGED AND DIFFICULT-TO-ENGAGE GROUPS

There are many different kinds of adults learners with many different learning needs. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution: policies should incorporate tailor-made programmes and be flexible enough to respond to each individual’s learning needs and motivations – including basic skills development for low-skilled learners. To accomplish this, forming partnerships with such intermediary organisations as community groups and trade unions is recommended.

4. IMPROVE THE RELEVANCE OF ADULT LEARNING FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED

When education and training opportunities address the specific needs and motivations of both learner and employer, not only does participation increase, but the end result is also better: meaning higher skills, access to better jobs and improved social outcomes. For this reason, adult learning policies and provision should be designed in a way that responds to the needs of different user groups.

5. ASSURE THE QUALITY OF ADULT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

It is important that adult learning provision be of high quality, both to ensure positive outcomes for learners, employers and the community, and to make the most effective use of public investment.

6. COORDINATE ADULT LEARNING POLICY AT NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS

For maximum policy success, there needs to be effective coordination of the different initiatives happening at the national, regional and local levels, and effective collaboration of all the various institutions, organisations and stakeholders.

A TOOL FOR IMPROVING ADULT LEARNING POLICY

These six factors for success are at the heart of a new policy analysis tool created for use by all those involved in adult learning policy.

A key finding of the study is that before a policy can be refined to better attain its objectives, policymakers first need a clearer understanding of how different policy approaches perform. This requires a more systematic collection of data and a more rigorous approach to policy monitoring. The new tool aims to help policymakers with both of these tasks.

The tool comprises two key elements. First there is an analytical framework [see box] to assist policymakers in designing and evaluating adult learning policies. Second is a set of indicators to help monitor policy implementation, evaluate policy impact, and compare these findings with those from other Member States.

An interactive online version of this tool is available on the EPALE website

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING ADULT LEARNING POLICIES

KEY SUCCESS FACTOR

1. Improve learners’ disposition towards learning
   - 1.1 Heighten awareness of benefits of adult learning
   - 1.2 Provide for targeted guidance to learners about learning options
   - 1.3 Engage social partners in the planning of, promotion of and recruitment of learners to adult learning
   - 1.4 Provide appropriate introductory learning experiences for learners

2. Increase employers’ investment in learning
   - 2.1 Provide funding to assist employers to upskill and retrain their workforce
   - 2.2 Promote the use of externally accredited qualifications by employers
   - 2.3 Promote the provision of work-based learning

3. Improve equity of access for all
   - 3.1 Fund learning for disadvantaged and difficult-to-engage groups, including the inactive and the unemployed
   - 3.2 Provide targeted guidance and support services and promote programmes to learners in under-represented groups
   - 3.3 Provide scheme to recognise prior learning (informal and non-formal)
   - 3.4 Use intermediary organisations in outreach to difficult-to-engage groups
   - 3.5 Embed basic skills development in adult learning programmes

4. Deliver learning that meets the needs of employers and learners
   - 4.1 Understand and identify needs and motivations of learners
   - 4.2 Identify current and future skills needs of employers (through skills forecasting) and align provision with these
   - 4.3 Promote innovation and flexibility in the delivery of learning
   - 4.4 Provide progression pathways for learners across the national qualifications framework

5. Deliver high quality adult learning
   - 5.1 Establish a quality control framework for monitoring and evaluation of adult learning programmes
   - 5.2 Develop a skilled adult education workforce through initial teacher training and continuous professional development

6. Coordinate an effective lifelong learning policy
   - 6.1 Coordinate adult learning (or lifelong learning) policy with other national policies for improving knowledge, skills and competences of adults
   - 6.2 Establish mechanisms for policy alignment at local and regional levels
   - 6.3 Build a knowledge base concerning what works in adult learning

SYSTEM-LEVEL INDICATORS

1. Increased participation in adult learning
2. Improved skills and competences
3. Higher quality of learning

OUTCOMES

Individuals
1. Increased income
2. Improved wellbeing (including health)

Employers
3. Increased employability
4. Reduced skills gap
5. More relevant qualifications
6. Higher GDP

Community
7. Increased levels of civic and social participation
8. Improved levels of equality
MORE INFORMATION

The European Commission-supported study “An in-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe” provides an overview of existing research on adult learning policies to support the implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning. It was undertaken in close cooperation with the Education and Training 2020 Working Group of national experts on adult learning.

The study can be found at:
http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=7851&type=2&furtherPubs=yes

THE EUROPEAN AGENDA FOR ADULT LEARNING

In 2011 the EU adopted the European Agenda for Adult Learning. The objective of this European policy cooperation initiative is for Member States to enable and encourage adults to develop and enhance their skills and competences at every stage of their lives.

At the core of this policy is an understanding that learning throughout adulthood is a vital part of the lifelong-learning pathway. Adult learning is defined as any general or vocational education or training, either formal informal or non-formal, which takes place after completing initial education and training.

The policy identifies a number of shared European priorities to significantly raise the quality and increase the number of adult learning opportunities available by 2020. Among these is a new emphasis on developing adults’ basic skills.

THE NEW SKILLS AGENDA FOR EUROPE

The adult learning challenge is one of several skills challenges faced by the EU. In order to optimise Europe’s human capital, boost employability and increase competitiveness, the New Skills Agenda for Europe 2016 invites Member States, social partners, industry and other stakeholders to collaborate to improve the quality and relevance of skills formation, make skills more visible and comparable and improve skills intelligence and information for better career choices.

Helping low-qualified and low-skilled adults is a key objective. The Skills Agenda proposes the establishment of a Skills Guarantee for Europe’s 64 million adults who did not complete their secondary education. The aim is to help them acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and/or to progress towards an upper secondary qualification or equivalent. Participants would start by undertaking a skills assessment to identify their skills and any skill gaps, have a learning package tailored to their specific needs, and the validation and the recognition of the skills they have acquired.

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