



European
Commission

Achievements under the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning

Report of the ET 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning (2018-2020)
Executive summary

Employment,
Social Affairs and
Inclusion

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Summary

Adult learning, as understood in the EU, covers the entire range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities - both general and vocational - undertaken by adults after leaving initial education (e.g. high school or college). Adult learning brings considerable benefits for learners themselves, for employers and for the wider community. Furthermore, adult learning contributes to all policy areas (e.g. economy, innovation, environment, democratic values) covered by the European Commission as all depend to some degree on the skills of people.

In 2011 the Council of the European Union adopted a renewed European Agenda on Adult Learning (EAAL) as part of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020). In 2015, the EAAL defined the following four priorities for the Member States and the European Commission to work on until 2020:



Governance: coherence with other policy areas, better coordination, effectiveness, relevance to needs of society and the economy, and more investment;



More **flexible and wider access** through more workplace learning and use of ICT, skills assessments, and second-chance opportunities leading to a recognised qualification;



Significantly increasing **supply and take up** of high-quality provision, especially in literacy, numeracy and digital skills. More effective outreach, guidance and motivation strategies;



Better **quality** assurance, policy monitoring, education of adult educators, better data on needs to target and design provision.

This document summarises the report which takes stock of the achievements under the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning (2011-2018) and identifies emerging topics and priorities that could be taken into account in the post-2020 period. The stocktaking is based on existing documentation and the expertise of the members of the Working Group on Adult Learning.

Taking stock

At EU level, the European Commission is responsible for a number of initiatives that supported Member States working on the EAAL priorities:



Governance of adult learning (EAAL priority 1):

In line with the EAAL priority, the European Commission has published guidance materials (studies etc.) to support improvements in the governance of adult learning. Furthermore, all the ET 2020 Working Groups on Adult Learning have addressed governance and financing issues in their recommendations.



Supply and take up of provision in adult learning (EAAL priority 2):

In recent years this EAAL priority was specifically addressed, in particular by the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways. In order to help them achieve increased levels of basic skill (literacy, numeracy and digital), low educated /low qualified are to be offered a skills assessment which should be the basis of a tailored offer of learning; skills acquired should be validated; adequate guidance and support to learners should be made available. The main findings of the European Commission's stock taking of the Member States proposed measures are that

- 1) still more action is needed by Member States and all stakeholders to increase the volume of the upskilling offer to match the scale of the challenge;
- 2) basic skills need to be addressed more explicitly;
- 3) attention to assessment of existing skills and prior learning as a basis for developing tailored learning pathways is required;
- 4) plans to coordinate and join up current and new opportunities need to be intensified; and finally,
- 5) future funding for Upskilling Pathways needs close monitoring to ensure that it leads to sustainable systems to develop lifelong learning for all in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights.



Access to adult learning (EAAL priority 3):

In line with this EAAL priority, the European Commission through Erasmus+ projects encourages further flexibilisation not only of adult learning, but also of vocational education and training (VET) and higher education programmes to increase adult participation (e.g. 2015-217 project on work-based training in the school-to-work transition process). Furthermore, the European Commission and its agencies have conducted studies on adult learning in VET and higher education. Using digital tools to improve access to adult learning has been the topic of the 2015-2017 Working Group on Adult learning. The group provided recommendations about how better use could be made of digital resources for adult learning. The topic has also been the subject of studies. Moreover adult learning at the workplace was a key focus of the 2016-2018 Working Group on Adult Learning. Finally, recognition of prior learning plays an important role in many policy developments (for instance Upskilling Pathways) and analytical work (see for instance the regular Cedefop monitoring reports the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning). The 2012 Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning is due to be implemented by 2018)



Quality assurance for adult learning (EAAL priority 4):

In line with the EAAL priority, the European Commission devoted one of the thematic Working Groups to quality in adult learning (ET 2020 Working Group 2011-2013) and devoted a study on quality in adult learning. Furthermore, the EQAVET framework provides a relevant framework for adult learning providers and systems, and EPAL is a major initiative to professionalise the sector. Finally, Erasmus+ supports the continuous professional development of adult educators.

Although Member States texts do not refer explicitly to the EAAL priorities, in the period 2011-2018, several policies have been developed and implemented that are in line with them:



In the area of **governance (EAAL priority 1)**, Member States updated and improved their VET and adult learning legislation and established better coordination mechanisms. Furthermore, adult learning is now being understood more holistically as any 'learning by adults', and not being confined to specific sectors or systems, thus challenging traditional coordination and governance models. Based on a survey of experts, asking them how public funding for adult learning has evolved since 2010, almost half of the country experts indicated that public funding for adult learning has increased between 2011 and 2018. This is partly the case due to a broader conception of adult learning spanning ministerial responsibilities. European funding still plays an important role in the funding of adult learning in many countries, which has implications for the long-term sustainability and development of the sector. There seems to be a renewed impetus for individual learning accounts as a strategy to encourage adults back into learning. The governance and policy frameworks also show that adult learning might sometimes be 'hidden' under other policies and frameworks, making it difficult to recognise it as a specific sector. Policy frameworks for adult learning still show signs of fragmentation and are not always well aligned between sectors, policy areas and legal frameworks related with adult learning. Despite the level of fragmentation, multi-governance working is a key strength of adult learning systems in the EU 28 as there is a notable increase in partnership working in this policy field across different agencies and levels, particularly over the last 3-5 years.



In the area of **supply and take up of provision (EAAL priority 2)**, Member States implemented different strategies, types of provision and supporting measures to improve chances for adults, especially specific vulnerable groups, to participate in learning. The current migration situation has led countries to develop programmes specifically

tailored towards those in need of language courses, although general citizenship courses were found to be implemented as well. Several initiatives focussed on digital skills and workplace learning and guidance and outreach initiatives have gained ground in several countries. Furthermore, Member States that see the need to expand guidance structures within existing structures as many countries acknowledge the need for improvements in the areas of outreach and guidance.



In the area of **access to adult learning (EAAL priority 3)**, Member States worked on equitable access to adult learning and further flexibilisation of educational pathways to increase accessibility for adults. Specific inequalities were addressed in Member States, for instance by targeting specific disadvantaged groups. In addition, countries reached out to specific economic sectors. In this context, the importance of effective guidance and information systems is mentioned. Specific attention was put on the use of digital tools to increase accessibility and to access learning while working. In this context, Member States put in place train the trainer programmes. In addition, MS continued working on policies on the recognition of prior learning.



In the area of **quality assurance for adult learning (EAAL priority 4)**, Member States implemented regulations and policies to improve quality assurance in adult learning. Also, broader reforms (such as VET reforms) touch upon quality assurance aspects. However, Member States still provide limited opportunities for the professionalisation of adult learning staff. Quality assurance and developing a quality culture in adult learning is slowly developing, partly under influence of EQAVET. Member States also worked on better data on labour market responsiveness of adult learning programmes and better monitoring and evaluation policies in adult learning.



The Key messages from the stocktaking

Attention of policy makers towards adult learning has generally increased and the policy area of adult learning is significantly broadened, being associated with more situation in which adults learn.

There is an increased felt need for functioning adult learning systems that respond to national and EU challenges in fast-changing contexts (changing nature of work; automation; demographic development).

At EU level, in the period 2011-2018, initiatives have been implemented that supported EU countries to work in line with the EAAL priorities.

In the Member States, developments have taken place in line with the EAAL priorities: changing and improving governance arrangements; implementing specific approaches to reach out to specific groups; developing more tailored and digital provision; and developing Quality Assurance mechanisms.

Still, despite efforts at EU and Member State level, the participation rate of adults in learning (as measured by the Labour Force Survey) has not significantly increased over this period. The EU Adult Education Survey and the EU Continuing Vocational Training Survey on the other hand show a more positive development in adult learning participation in Europe.

The current indicator (EU-LFS) seems not fully capable of capturing the effects of major policy reforms.

The stocktaking has identified several areas that still require further policy attention at Member State and EU level. This relates to conditions for adult learning, specific target groups, and specific focus areas.



Development areas for post 2020 as identified on the basis of the stocktaking

Development areas can be split into enabling conditions, specific focus areas, and specific target groups.

Enabling conditions: what structures and systems need improvement?

Adult learning should be seen as being of benefit for individuals, employers and society. Adult learning should be seen not as a burden (in terms of time, money), but as an investment that pays off for all: there is no learning without benefits. This requires further developing a learning culture in the economy and society, and making everyone aware of the benefits of learning. To progress in this direction, further attention post-2020 needs to be given to:

- **Financing**
- **Coordination**
- **Engagement with employers**
- **Professionalisation of adult learning staff and institutions**

Specific focus areas: what aspects in the adult learning provision need additional attention?

A future orientation of adult learning policies should pay attention to specific areas:

- **Inclusive societies:** adult learning could do more to include key competences in the learning processes and contribute to inclusive societies. This relates for instance to critical thinking to support a better understanding of fake news.
- **Digital societies:** adult learning can focus even more on the use of digital tools. This is both to educate and train adults to use digital tools but also to use more digital tools for educational purposes. This also requires adult learning professionals to further develop skills and competences in this area
- **Learning workplaces:** adult learning could further stimulate learning in the workplace, emphasising that the workplace is seen as a site of learning for all (not only for young people in an initial VET programme).

Target groups: which adults need specific attention?

Adult learning should be for all. This means that all adults will be provided with opportunities for learning under the right conditions. These conditions differ between target groups, such as those who:

- Have a migrant background
- Have long been out of education and training pathways for a long time
- Lack basic skills
- Are unemployed
- Are below or at the poverty threshold



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In 2011 the Council of the European Union adopted a renewed European Agenda on Adult Learning (EAAL) as part of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020). Since 2015, the EAAL defined four priorities to work on in adult learning policies, namely, governance; increasing supply and take up; more flexible and wider access; and finally, quality.

Given the mandate of the ET 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning, which includes identifying policy priorities in adult learning for the period after 2020, it is an opportune time to take stock of the achievement in the period 2011-2018, and to learn about what new priorities are emerging. This report takes stock of the achievements and identifies emerging topics and priorities for the post-2020 period.

The report concludes that attention of policy makers towards adult learning has generally increased and that there is an increased felt need for functioning adult learning systems. Furthermore, **at EU level initiatives have been implemented that supported EU countries to work in line with the EAAL priorities** and at MS level, developments have taken place in line with the EAAL priorities. Still, despite efforts at EU and Member State level, the participation rate of adults in learning (as measured by the Labour Force Survey) has not significantly increased over this period. Finally, the stocktaking has identified several areas that still require further policy attention at MS and EU level. This relates to conditions for adult learning, specific target groups, and specific focus areas.

Full report:

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8260&furtherPubs=yes>

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