



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

Resilience of Individuals, Communities and Economies: We need more Adult Learning and Education in and after the Coronavirus Pandemic

EAEA Statement

April 2020

All of Europe and many regions of the world beyond are severely affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The daily lives of millions of people have changed radically, and many are worried about their health, jobs and well-being. Across Europe, adult education providers are forced to cancel or virtually continue courses. The loss of the financial basis through these measures has dramatic consequences for course providers, the sustainability of institutions, staff and, last but not least, learners. However, to mitigate the consequences of the social and economic crisis that will follow this pandemic, adult education and training will be needed more than ever.

Adult learning and education sector severely affected by the consequences of the pandemic

Like no other education sector, adult learning and education (ALE) in Europe is severely affected by the Coronavirus pandemic and has entered a crisis of its own. The insufficient structural and financial support for ALE providers over a long period of time in many European countries has resulted in a situation in which ALE providers find themselves struggling to cover the running costs of their institutions, let alone pay trainers and educators. The sector employs thousands of freelance workers – an employment model which is precarious even without crisis – that now have to be laid off.

Adult education is largely financed through participation fees as well as through project and programme funding, often linked to numbers of participants in a course. This means that funding stops as soon as participants cannot participate in courses and trainings anymore. According to a survey of EAEA members, the vast majority of courses and trainings in the countries affected by the pandemic had to be cancelled, taking away the basis of income of a large number of ALE providers. There is a great insecurity among providers if activities can be taken up again – and will be financed – after the crisis. This situation can lead to the disappearance of established institutions, or, where employment or service contracts have to be terminated, to a great loss of competences.

Some governments have developed “force majeure” regulations for education and lifelong learning systems that allow learning providers to move courses online; however, these regulations do not always include adult learning. Although there is a great deal of uncertainty among adult education institutions as to whether digital learning can be financed at all with the existing funding rules, an important proportion of learning provision has been shifted to the digital world. Innovation in the field of online learning has received a big boost in the first weeks of the crisis. Within a very short period of time, adult education

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institutions have set up digital learning platforms and adult educators have acquired the necessary skills to teach online.

Even where it is possible to run courses online, this does not always serve the objectives of adult education. Non-formal ALE plays a key role for the social inclusion of the most vulnerable groups in society by providing safe spaces to learn together and by helping people to build new social networks. These groups suffer most from the crisis as they are not only those who are at great risk of losing their jobs and financial as well as social perspectives, but also because they are the most likely to lack access to ICT equipment and strong internet connections, along with the digital skills required to participate in online learning. The current crisis shows by whom ALE is particularly needed: by elderly persons who have no computer skills and therefore have little or no contact with the outside world, as well as parents who cannot support their children in digital learning.

However, the digital divide does not stop at other social groups: 40% of adult Europeans have few or no digital skills. Moreover, not all ALE providers are, at present, equipped to manage and host online trainings. Modern electronic devices and software ask for serious investments that many ALE providers cannot allow themselves. What is more, trainers and educators do not always have up-to-date digital skills to be able to switch from face-to-face training to online learning within a matter of days. In the current pandemic, we also have to recognise that many individuals will not have the opportunity to dedicate time to online learning due to other responsibilities, such as care work in the family and home-schooling children. This needs to be taken into account by funders of ALE providers when it comes to proving participation levels in courses and trainings.

As yet, adult education organisations and providers do not know the exact scope of the impact of COVID-19 on ALE provision; however, they say that access to adult learning has been limited dramatically in many countries. At the same time, ALE providers are doing their utmost to be able to keep up core activities – for many, this means outreach to vulnerable groups. Even if learning activities have to stop, adult education centres remain lifelines of social inclusion in many communities by providing mentoring and counselling of individuals that find themselves in difficult social or economic situations.

ALE can strengthen the resilience of individuals, communities and markets

Such crises as the current pandemic show time and again what ultimately counts: not the well-being of the economy or certain sectors of it, but that of the people of Europe and beyond. If people are put before profit, there is a good chance that this will not only lead to the well-being of individuals, but also of communities and markets. This should be a guiding principle in the future when creating new strategies and policies. In, but especially after, the crisis, adult education can play a crucial role in combating the crisis on several levels: by putting people first, all areas of their lives are considered - from health to family to a



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sustainable lifestyle and working life, to name just a few areas.

While the sector faces a number of severe challenges, ALE can be extremely powerful in times of crises such as this. Critical media literacy, a primary learning objective of non-formal ALE, is central for people to navigate the flood of information on measures to contain the spread of the virus. Non-compliance, i.e. failure to act in accordance with rules imposed by governments, is one of the costliest human impacts on health systems, and, as a consequence, also on economies, in Europe right now. The biggest factors motivating non-compliance include miseducation and mistrust towards governmental institutions. The spreading of fake news is just as contagious as the virus. Critical media literacy can help individuals to understand the importance of complying to medical policy during the pandemic. This not only decreases the likelihood of a collapse of the health systems but also is less costly than the implementation of state control and “battlefield medicine” as a response to the crisis.

By providing health education, non-formal adult learning also contributes to better health practices year-round. Health education not only provides information and encouragement for people taking medications or with specific health problems, but it also looks at daily measures and changes to prevent the spread of infectious disease (such as hygiene measures), and how to reduce the occurrence of preventable diseases, such as providing information on reducing unhealthy habits with strong connections to cancerous growths, heart disease, obesity and other modern health ‘epidemics’. Comprehensive health education, which focuses on both physical and mental health, helps adults to feel empowered to make good choices for their health, not to mention the health of their families.

Community-based adult learning is a key enabler for building intergenerational and transcultural networks in neighbourhoods and cities by bringing together people around activities that are of interest for the entire community. Low-threshold learning offers and tailored programmes, for instance around life skills, promote motivation to learn and to continue learning. This, in turn, leads to a greater solidarity in communities as well as a higher employability of individuals. Where individuals and communities are empowered to make informed decisions for their lives, they are more likely to participate in democratic processes, pay taxes, protect the environment etc. The EAEA Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st Century lists these and many more benefits of ALE.

ALE can help to make individuals, communities as well as markets more resilient not only in our ability to see out this pandemic, but also in developing stronger tools for dealing with the social and economic crisis that is very likely to follow the pandemic. However, if governments and authorities at all political levels do not react now, there is a great risk that the ALE sector will be affected by a major weakening of its structures and will no longer be able to fulfil its role in a period of recession. Adequate political and financial support is urgently needed to ensure that non-formal learning offers can continue to be provided during and after the crisis.

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More Europe is needed now

One lesson that should be learned from the crisis is that it is precisely in a crisis like this, but above all afterwards, that more rather than less Europe is needed in order to give all EU Member States the opportunity to rebuild their social coexistence and their economies. The current crisis shows that the European idea is not being lived and that achievements of the past 50 years are very quickly being abandoned under the guise of protecting citizens, such as the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital. It shows that stronger EU cooperation in the health sector would have led to a much faster improvement of the situation in the individual EU countries, for example by allowing the EU to make bundled purchases of hospital equipment.

If there had been more cooperation in the field of education, it can be assumed that there would not have been such a crisis from the outset. If the European Union is interested in strengthening the sense of belonging of its citizens and reinforcing the European idea medium and long term, now is the time to give sustained support to programmes such as the European Agenda for Adult Learning and to create a successor programme.

We expect national and regional governments – and the support of the European Union – to take effective measures to enable ALE providers and staff to cope with the consequences of this unpredictable crisis. This includes:

- Setting up **emergency funds for non-profit ALE providers and self-employed teachers, trainers and other ALE staff** who find themselves in an existential threat situation due to the corona crisis, comparable to emergency funds for the cultural sector that were set up in a number of countries.
- Full **compensation of courses that are commissioned by public authorities** in the context of labour market measures, the promotion of integration or other support structures, that cannot be carried out due to the pandemic and the closing of ALE centres.
- Promotion of ALE through **additional public funding to mitigate the consequences of the social and economic crisis** after the pandemic, for instance through education vouchers for all residents, citizens and migrants, or through supporting tailored learning programmes.
- Setting up of **digitisation funds for non-profit ALE providers**, to assist them in the transition to digital formats.

For programmes, courses and training supported by regional, national and European funding sources, we demand:

- **Removal of restrictions to move courses online** and abandoning of the requirement of physical presence of participants to obtain funding for courses and trainings. We particularly ask the



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European institutions to remove requirements of EU-funded programmes for keeping signature lists or recording presence through other means in the learning centres.

- Furthermore, if courses can be conducted digitally, **learning methods with a higher proportion of self-directed learning** should also be accepted. This means, for instance, that a course with 6 hours per day face-to-face training in a training centre should not be required to be translated into 6 hours per day of webinars or video-conferences. Elements of “flipped classroom” or other methodologies need to be recognised as appropriate learning methods that lead to the same learning outcomes. Funders and funding agencies should grant beneficiaries maximum flexibility in re-arranging their learning programmes.

We urge the European Union to:

- **Continue and strengthen adult education strategies at EU level**, in particular the European Agenda for Adult Learning: in addition to a skills orientation, the current crisis shows that educational areas such as health education, wellbeing and civic education are not only important for individuals, but that they are also an absolute necessity for rebuilding communities and economies. In the Nordic as well as German-speaking countries, these areas have long been – very successfully – integrated in adult education programmes. A European strategy could offer orientation to other countries that do not yet have appropriate structures and offers.
- Provide **structural support** to countries that do not yet have strong adult learning structures: Structural support programmes at European level and transnational cooperation are therefore all the more important for these countries to develop their own strategies and structures. The ESF, but also other programmes such as Erasmus+, play a central role in this respect, which must be strengthened to enable more countries to participate at the same level in the EU.

Europe needs a strong ALE sector to meet the economic, social and environmental challenges of the coming years, now more than ever!

For any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the EAEA Secretary General Gina Ebner (gina.ebner@eaea.org) or the EAEA Head of Policy Raffaella Kihrer (raffaella.kihrer@eaea.org).

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 130 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.

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