



# Adult Learning and Education Policies and Practices in Europe

An Insight of Regional and Local Stakeholders



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- delegate of the regional minister/politician responsible for adult education and learning policies
- regional or national law maker in the field of adult education and learning policies
- regional officer responsible for adult education and learning provision
- deputy Mayor involved in adult education and learning policies
- chair of local adult education Council
- local officer responsible for adult education and learning provisions
- leader of an adult education organisation
- manager of an adult education organisation
- coordinator of an adult education organisation

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# Executive Summary

This report summarises the results of a survey carried out in the framework of the RegALE project (Regional capacity for adult learning and education), led by the European Association for Education of Adults (EAEA) and funded by the European Commission.

The goal of the survey is to derive a multi-layered view on:

- the challenges and opportunities of the adult education sector at the regional and local level, and
- the gaps and needs of the adult learning and education (further ALE) staff to use them for the future steps of the project.

The survey was carried out in 2021 and set up taking into account the results of the research heritage accumulated in recent decades (from historical studies on nineteenth-century utopias to the idea of "educating communities" of the middle of the last century to the most recent approach of "local learning ecosystems").

The REGALE survey focused on an additional research level: the stakeholders' subjective perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about the actual situation and future perspectives of adult learning and education in Europe. The reason is that, in a democratic society, stakeholders' views, mind-sets, and ideas determine the development prospects of adult education in regions and cities.

This report analyses the results of the survey referring to nine thematic areas:

- *Public policies*. It is a general opinion that the various countries surveyed are experiencing a favourable time for the development and adoption of plans, strategies, regulations, frameworks, and special projects on adult learning. However, it is also noted that their implementation is slow to manifest significant and perceptible effects at the local level. According to the respondents, this issue can be caused by the policies' inability to act in the long term. Furthermore, the belief emerges that policies focus on sectoral aspects and areas of adult learning, originating patchy systems. Improvements could be achieved by adopting a more holistic approach and evidence-based policies.

- *Adult Education Organisations (further AEOs)*. The opinions expressed within the survey highlight how AEOs can cover complementary, substitute, or completely autonomous

functions concerning public lifelong learning policies. Everywhere, however, AEOs are given a central role that is more relevant than the role plaid by public institutions. That is because of the variety of fields in which they operate and their ability to include disadvantaged targets. The survey highlights some limits to be overcome that concern, in particular, the need to increase the relevance and quality of the adult learning offer, in particular, the one addressed to the diverse groups of the disadvantaged public. In the near future, the number of AEOs is expected to be reduced due to centralisation and efficiency processes. But at the same time, demand for adult learning, skills for life, and closer relations with the labour market are expected to grow.

- *Disadvantaged groups.* Dissatisfaction with the low level of the investments addressed to disadvantaged groups is expressed by 4 out of 5 respondents. The factors that limit equity in access are economic barriers, the lack of relevance of the training offer, and the lack of progression pathways and outreach activities. At the same time, the lack of guidance and support services is evident, and the policies aimed at encouraging disadvantaged groups to make their learning demands explicit are rare. That is considered crucial in contributing to the stagnation in the participation of vulnerable learners.

- *Investments.* The prevailing opinion is that current funding is adequate to maintain the existing balance between supply and demand for adult learning. However, this funding is considered insufficient to guarantee the expansion of ALE. About 4 out of 5 respondents believe that priorities for spending are not well selected and that the effectiveness and impact of expenditure are scarce.

- *Systems.* The respondents also indicated that a comprehensive adult learning system endowed with shared values, principles, missions, functions, and concerted priorities does not exist. The cooperation and coordination among the various stakeholders are considered casual or weak. They often operate within project clusters, with few opportunities for interrelation and without structural support.

- *Adult learning and education workforce.* The lack of an adequately qualified ALE workforce constitutes a problem that respondents equate to the need to build a healthy economic and financial situation for the AEOs. The opinion of 3 out of 4 respondents is that, without qualified staff, it will be challenging to face the complexity of the future learning demand. About 2 out of 3 believe that the current policy commitment to support their

professionalisation is insufficient. Furthermore, the survey results underline the need for actions to improve the status of the adult learning and education workforce.

- *Adult Learning & Education supply and demand.* In all the surveyed countries, the training and education offer covers a lot of fields (i.e., second-chance education, cultural activities, health). However, learning opportunities are deemed insufficient to meet the needs of different groups of the population, in particular, the most vulnerable ones. The training in basic skills for work, life, and citizenship is considered an improving trend by respondents. The mismatch between training supply and demand is common in all evaluated countries. According to the majority of respondents, the discrepancy between the training offer and the training demand is due to a lack of knowledge of current and future training demands by public and private stakeholders. That seems to be also verified in countries where dedicated forecasting services related to the evolution of labour markets and social innovations exist.

- *Governance.* In spite of the different models of administrative decentralisation in Europe, respondents were asked to provide views on vertical and horizontal governance. For the former one, views on decentralisation models are divergent: among respondents who expressed an opinion, the ones who consider that there is a good balance of power between central and local governments or a high level of autonomy prevail (61.4%). Other respondents (75, or 33.6% of the total) highlight excessive centralism in power distribution. Horizontal governance calls into question the ability of those who carry out public functions to establish forms of collaboration with a great variety of public, private, and private-social actors. The collected opinions assessed the cooperation between regional/local governments and actors such as social partners, businesses, and adult learning organisations. A widespread dissatisfaction emerges about the ability to build and strengthen partnerships among the wide range of social actors involved in adult learning and education policies.

- *Internationalisation.* The benefits of boosting the internationalisation of adult learning stakeholders are confirmed by 2 out of 3 respondents. The remaining did not answer or considered themselves not interested or not competent in the field. Respondents indicated that internationalisation could produce the following benefits (in order of importance):

- a) develop and innovate through mutual learning processes (67%)
- b) access to international financing (50.6%)

- c) influence international policies (46.8%)
- d) globalise organisations and activities (45.5%).

## The RegALE<sup>1</sup> project

RegALE stands for Regional capacity for adult learning and education. The objective of the project is to increase the capacity of partners as well as their networks, stakeholders, partners and members, at their level of activity, to respond to their challenges, to build cooperation structures, and promote an adult learning and education (further ALE) culture in communities, cities and regions in the European Union.

The project is headed by the European Association for Education of Adults (EAEA) and funded by Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission.

The consortium is composed of 11 partners (and 7 associate) representing public authorities operating at local/regional level, ALE associations from all over Europe, a university, and two networks- EAEA and EARLALL.

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<sup>1</sup> More information available at <https://regalnetwork.eu/>

# 1. Methodological premise

## 1.1. Objectives of the survey and methods for data collection and processing

The report presents the results of a survey carried out within the framework of the RegALE project. The survey gathered responses from local and regional stakeholders asking about the current status and future perspectives of adult learning and education in Europe.

The objective of the survey is to get a multi-layered view of

- the challenges and opportunities of the adult education sector at the regional and local level, and
- the gaps and needs of the adult learning and education staff to use them for the future steps of the project.

The method used for the Regale Survey is the Delphi method, designed to facilitate a material comparison between opinions and assessments of the experts responding to the survey. The survey was divided into a cycle of two further phases aimed at clarifying the responses and sharing, discussing, and interpreting the results (through various local and international webinars and seminars) collectively. This cycle will continue until the end of 2023.

The tool adopted is a questionnaire, where the items are structured according to the conceptual framework for adult learning policies assessment proposed in a study by the European Commission (2015<sup>2</sup>). This study developed a conceptual model which explains the links between policy actions and their effects, thus helping in assessing to what extent existing policy interventions and broader policy frameworks are effective in achieving their aims. In particular, in the RegALE survey, this framework has been adopted to collect the

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<sup>2</sup> For a full description of the study and related framework see European Commission (2015). *An in-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe*, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/epale/sites/epale/files/all\\_in-depth\\_analysis\\_of\\_adult\\_learning\\_policies\\_and\\_their\\_effectiveness\\_in\\_europe\\_12.11.2015\\_pdf.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/epale/sites/epale/files/all_in-depth_analysis_of_adult_learning_policies_and_their_effectiveness_in_europe_12.11.2015_pdf.pdf)

assessments of respondents according to the essential factors influencing the participation in adult learning and education and their capability to deliver adequate skills supply both for individuals (equity) and for society (sustainability).

In addition, the RegALE survey included some items to contextualise these responses within the current period (the pandemic and the implementation of Next generation Europe), and investigate their expectations about the near future.

Respondents were asked to assess each of the items, expressing their views about

- the probability of occurrence, and
- the arguments that were useful to explain their personal view.

The questionnaire was delivered via the Survey Monkey platform. After a preliminary test, the questionnaire was available online for three months. The required time to fill it was

- approximately 20' for the quantitative assessments, and
- approximately 40' for the qualitative assessments.

Respondents also had the option to upload any documents they found useful concerning the item and expressed opinions. A total of 33 sources were collected.

For the items having to do with the assessment of the status of policy implementation or the forecasting of future developments, respondents were asked to rank their opinions against a 5-point rating scale. A total of 11 categories of items were related to the following thematic areas: 1. Develop learners' interest in learning (guidance, validation and recognition included). 2. Increasing employers' investment in learning. 3. Improving equity of access for all. 4. Learning that is relevant. 5. High quality learning. 6. Coherent, complementary and evidence-based policy. 7. Regional/local, or national if it applies, investments in adult learning and changes over time are. 8. EU support via structural funds (primarily European Social Fund) and Next Generation Europe, the COVID-19 Recovery Package. 9. Cooperation among stakeholders. 10. Sustainability. 11. In your opinion to what extent each of the following factors do have an impact on the sustainability of Adult education organisations?. In these cases, a unipolar scale was adopted. In relation to that scale respondents expressed

their assessment or opinion by choosing from five options through which to modulate their percentage of agreement, from the lowest to the highest option (5%, 30%, 50%, 80%, 100%).

As far as the data processing is concerned, to simplify the reading of the semantic differential, the present Report proposes an aggregated reprocessing of the results that allowed a subsequent comparison of the least favorable opinions -corresponding to the choices of 5%, 30%, and 50% - with the most favorable ones -corresponding to the choice of 80% and 100%-. The position of those who chose the intermediate option was not considered a "non-choice," but an adherence to the option proposed by the item, which nevertheless calls out the desirability of improvement interventions. Therefore, where the Report identifies a tendentially prevailing opinion, this is a result of the type of elaborations as outlined above.

## 1.2. The sample

The survey targeted ALE experts, stakeholders from public authorities, and private institutions from 12 EU countries. Project partners selected the sample in each country based on predefined criteria. A total of 241 professionals took part in the study.

### 1.2.1. Professional position

The data for professional positions in the sample needs careful revision to be validated. Below, however, we use the data available to date, pointing out that in the next version of the report, there might be changes both in terms of individual positions and - albeit to a lesser extent - concerning the membership of local or regional government bodies.

The overall sample (241 respondents) consisted of:

- Regional minister/politician responsible for adult learning and education policies (2.90%, i.e. 7)
- Delegate/Representative of the Regional minister/politician responsible for adult learning and education policies (0.83%, i.e. 2)

- Regional or national lawmaker in the field of adult learning and education policies (0)
- Regional officer responsible for adult learning and education provision (9.13%, i.e. 22)
- Deputy Mayor involved in adult learning and education policies (0.83%, i.e. 2)
- Chair of the local adult education Council (1.66%, i.e. 4)
- Local officer responsible for adult learning and education provisions (12.45%, i.e. 30)
- Leader of an adult education organisation (21.99%, i.e. 53)
- Manager of an adult education organisation (21.58%, i.e. 52)
- Coordinator of an adult education organisation (28.63%, i.e. 69).

The following took part in the Survey:

- 67 policymakers and professionals involved in governing the local and regional adult education system (28%)
- 174 professionals engaged in directing, managing, and coordinating adult education organisations (AEOs) (72%).

The following did not specify any challenges and opportunities:

- Regional minister/politician responsible for adult learning and education policies (3)
- Delegate/Representative of the Regional minister/politician responsible for adult learning and education policies (1)
- Regional or national lawmaker in the field of adult learning and education policies (0)
- Regional officer responsible for adult learning and education provision (5)
- Deputy Mayor involved in adult learning and education policies (0)
- Chair of the local adult education Council (2)
- Local officer responsible for adult learning and education provisions (14)
- Leader of an adult education organisation (22)

- Manager of an adult education organisation (13)
- Coordinator of an adult education organisation (25)

Overall it consists of:

- 25 policymakers and professionals engaged in the governance of the local and regional adult education system, representing 40.3% of the category
- 60 professionals engaged in directing, managing and coordinating AEOs, representing 34.5% of the category.

## 1.2.2. Distribution by country

A total of 241 people from 21 EU countries participated in the survey. Of these, 156 from 18 countries completed the questionnaire in its entirety. Eighty-five answered only the questions that required expressing an assessment omitting the questions that required a more in-depth reflection about the system and an indication of the challenges and opportunities for its development (Table 1):

	<b>Survey completed</b>	<b>Survey completed partially</b>	<b>Total</b>
Austria	1	1	2
Belgium	-	2	2
Bulgaria	1	-	1
Croatia	20	12	32
Estonia	16	5	21
Finland	1	-	1
Germany	12	9	21
Greece	23	4	27
Hungary	2	1	3
Ireland	7	2	9
Iceland	-	1	1
Italy	32	16	48
Latvia	1	-	1
The Netherlands	1	-	1
Portugal	-	1	1
Norway	22	21	43
Slovakia	1	1	2

Spain	2	1	3
Sweden	3	4	7
Switzerland	1	1	2
United Kingdom	10	3	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>241</b>

*Table 1. Countries participated in RegALE survey and the completion of the survey by respondents.*

The data processing adopted in this report results from a preliminary data analysis and an interpretation aimed at capturing the main implications emerging from the data collected.

This report provides an account of reading to identify emerging challenges and opportunities, taking into account the six key success factors but devoting special attention to the issues particularly relevant to the AEOs and the Regional and Local Governments (for example, governance and quality of professionals).

For the formulation of challenges and opportunities, the researchers adopted a multitrait/multimethod approach based on:

- qualitative and quantitative analysis of the survey results
- their interpretation of the most significant data in terms of opinions expressed and the potential relevance in terms of the impact of possible opportunities
- comparison of the survey results with the relevant literature (but the emergence of conflicting and original insights was still respected)
- the interpretations and evaluations that emerged during two focus groups organised with experts from the project partner countries
- the development of a provisional summary based on a criterion of desirability and sustainability.

The current formulations will be subject to further review with critical players in the RegALE project, especially the EAEA and EARLALL members.

## 2. The two main results of the survey: the set of nonlinear systems and the learning exclusion equilibrium

### 2.1. Non-linear systems

Adult learning and education is a complex field, with a set of dynamic, nonlinear systems driven by public and private stakeholders, for-profit and not-for-profit, and professionals qualified in specific areas of adult learning or trained for other educational sectors. Policy fragmentation is high as the policies that deal with ALE (labour, education, justice, training, transportation, etc.) are drafted without cross-sectorial and intra-institutional strategies.

The snapshot emerging from the survey (in particular, when respondents assess the level of cooperation between stakeholders) is that each sector organises the training offer with different rules and act according to the various ALE representations and narratives related to their strategies or educational services.

The more developed the public ALE system is in the country, the higher the variety of public and private stakeholders is - including their specialities and functions. It is also true that where public intervention is weak and demand for training is high, for-profit or not-for-profit private ALE initiatives develop.

The diversity of visions and perceptions seems to manifest in relation to the specific sector with which each stakeholder identifies. The work done by the respondent shapes the idea of education accompanying the practices (or rather, the narratives with which they are communicated).

In the open-ended questions of the survey, no matter the country they come from, teachers tend to focus on teaching issues, while managers about management or organisational issues. That highlights the diversity of interest among different professional categories.

The survey does not reveal a strategic vision or common orientations about the future, even among those who work in public institutions. Perceptions and plans are related to the mission of the sector (education, vocational training, culture, services, social policies, etc.) or to the specific institution to which respondents belong.

The diversity of organisational contexts that generate and manage adult learning processes has a unifying element in the function performed, namely adults' learning. However, there is no evidence of an holistic system, general plans, consistent organisation, coherent services, and dedicated financial resources. That, at least, is not apparent from any of the responses. Diversity and competition or parallelism characterize the relationships between actors. These appear to be structured primarily as relationships within sector clusters, with a local and regional dimension, even if they belong to national networks and systems. These clusters are often territorially based and gather interconnected organisations, specialised providers, service providers, and associated organisations operating in a particular field and characterized by the simultaneous presence of competitive and cooperative relationships.

Hence, the challenge and the generalised demand for public policies that orient and support all actors towards strategic priorities that respond to the development objectives each local and national reality has. Moreover, public policies are required to orient and support all actors towards adequate quality standards of the learning offerings.

Rules, services, and funding are the tools on which everyone expectations converge. That is also the case for a more equitable distribution of opportunities to participate in adult learning.

### 2.1.1. Learning exclusion equilibrium

Setting priorities, advocating for quality, and ensuring equity are the main functions recognised in public policies. That remains a challenge in all the surveyed countries.<sup>3</sup> Everywhere, expectations and opinions point out the most serious problem: the difficulty

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<sup>3</sup> The three functions of public policies are explained by the European Commission in the above-mentioned publication (2015, *An in-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe*, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/epale/sites/epale/files/all\\_in-depth\\_analysis\\_of\\_adult\\_learning\\_policies\\_and\\_their\\_effectiveness\\_in\\_europe\\_12.11.2015\\_pdf.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/epale/sites/epale/files/all_in-depth_analysis_of_adult_learning_policies_and_their_effectiveness_in_europe_12.11.2015_pdf.pdf)).

for public policies to act to alter the “*learning exclusion equilibrium*”<sup>4</sup> for the progressive reduction of low-skilled and low-qualified adults.

The idea of “*learning exclusion equilibrium*” helps understand why levels of participation in adult education do not increase. That is typical of situations where an economy becomes trapped in a vicious circle of low added value, lacking skills, and insufficient wages. It occurs wherever the weak demand for skills from businesses is added to the inadequate attention to this problem from public policies. In other words, both the labour market and the State contribute to a poor skills supply for citizens. At the same time, young people and adults have a weak propensity to invest in their education and training. The economy and society seem to have adapted to the high number of low-skilled and low-qualified adults living in the respondents' contexts. In this frame, their training is entrusted to the incidental informal learning processes occurring where they live and work.

That explains why, with respect to each of the themes investigated by the survey, it is possible to find a significant number of subjects who express their satisfaction with the existing situation. But it also explains why most respondents (being politicians and professionals involved in the governance of the local and regional adult education system or professionals engaged in the direction, management, and coordination of AEOs) express dissatisfaction with a situation they consider inadequate and characterized by inefficiencies and short-term plans.

In the following pages, we propose some interpretive hypotheses to understand the challenges faced when strengthening the action of the various actors, clusters, and public sector systems in order to increase citizen participation in adult learning opportunities. Understanding the challenges of this period and the coming years should help identify the

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<sup>4</sup> The “*learning exclusion equilibrium*” has its roots in the “*low skills equilibrium*”. The latter one was coined in the late 80ies (Finegold and Soskice, 1988). The idea that stands beyond is that participation in adult learning and education is a variable of this equilibrium. This is to say that there is an equilibrium that is being accepted by public policies and businesses between the competence supply and the skills demand. Demand is predominantly for low skills job and supply tends to provide low skilled workforce. This is also connected to little incentives to participate in education and training and raise qualifications levels and aspirations of individuals.

opportunities that lead to fostering the capacities of all public and private actors operating at local and regional levels all over Europe to action and impact.

## 3. Public policies, systems, investments, organisations

### 3.1. Public policies

In Europe, States at different levels of government have been adopting policies on adult learning over the past several decades.

The survey highlights that we are currently going through a historical moment characterised by a significant production of strategies and policies prepared by the different sections of public administration, so much so that one respondent states:

*"There is a lot of 'policy' and 'strategy' development - from a vast array of stakeholders - including Dept. Rural Community; Dept. Welfare; Dept. Justice; Dept. Health; and many, many agencies and organisations."*

The Council Recommendations on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults (Council of the European Union, 2016) and proposed strategies developed at the European level have likely encouraged reflection in the Member States. The national strategic plans for the development of the skills of the adult population seem to have accompanied the issuing of sectoral policies, but not general ones aimed at coordinating all the plans and interventions according to shared objectives.

The current European and national strategies for digital and green transitions have favoured the preparation of national projects aimed at investing existing resources for this purpose.

However, respondents believe that in most cases, the results of such efforts are limited to the funding of projects and best practices. The difficulty is to let them become opportunities to initiate lasting interventions that have long-term effects.

In the immediate term, this produces the development of "patchy systems" whose weak capacity for impact is aggravated in the less-favoured areas: in the most disadvantaged regions and the peripheral territories (city outskirts and the countryside).

The adoption of new policies and legislative acts is evaluated positively if it reinforces existing provision with measures that aim to establish or enhance additional services, such as validation of skills and guidance. Many respondents perceive the latter as attractive strategies in existing policies or valuable if included in interventions related to the labour market. Work-based learning is considered a crucial area of intervention because it brings adult education of the working population closer to the world of work.

*"Without integrated, impartial and accessible, professional Guidance & Information the access to 'Pathways' remains inaccessible for the majority of Adults that would benefit from such information."*

However, public policies aimed at incentivising businesses to invest in training are considered inadequate to support the role that entrepreneurs can play in ALE participation for workers of all ages. Respondents believe that the third sector plays a more vital role for that purpose than the public policy (48% vs. 52%<sup>5</sup>), albeit this is often limited to disadvantaged workers. This opinion is widespread among politicians involved in the governance of the local and regional adult education system (59.5%), as well as, albeit to a lesser degree, among professionals dealing with the direction, management, and coordination of educational organisations (47.6%).

In a rich and jagged framework of policies and acts, innovation is focused on individual systems or specific services. The strive for innovation is also affected by the trade-off between the promotion of innovative processes and the inertia produced by the push for maintenance of the existing systems. It is well-known that overcoming resistance to systems change and self-reproduction requires long-term policies. The lack of processes that allow monitoring and evaluating results and impact of policies is not conducive to the forward-

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<sup>5</sup> Data reported in this Chapter refer to the data processing methods as described in § 1.1.

looking policies adoption and, therefore, to innovation development. That is a widely shared problem: the need to move towards evidence-based strategies, at the local level especially, as it is considered weak by 72.9% of respondents.

*“There is a lot of inquiry going on, which supports the development of policy and new initiatives. At the same time, a lot of initiatives tend to be based on random opportunities and "the hot topic of the day" implemented superficially.”*

### **Challenges**

At the moment, the national strategies taken up by the *National Strategic Plans for the development of the competencies of the adult population* have not yielded significant results concerning the preparation of implementation policies. There is a prevailing trend towards sectoral and short-term measures.

### **Opportunities**

The new European programmes and the need to address the post-pandemic crisis also through adult learning can be seen as a historic opportunity to strengthen the role of public policies and their ability to promote the construction of services and incentives for the development of participation in adult learning and a more qualified offering for disadvantaged groups.

## **3.2. Systems**

The number of public spheres involved in adult education is trending upward at the national and local levels. Looking at public administration domains such as labour, justice, or defence, we can observe different sectorial systems adopted to train adults as employees or recipients of their policies (i.e., judges, prisoners, employers, workers, soldiers, migrants, etc.). This variety constitutes a set of misaligned approaches, according to 72% of respondents<sup>6</sup>. This problem concerns the development of national strategic guidelines and

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<sup>6</sup> Data reported in this Chapter refer to the data processing methods as described in § 1.1.

the orientation and management of services and activities. The set of procedures coexists within a polycentric structure that hinders coherent action even at the local level:

*"Policy is expected to be decided at national level. In Ireland, we now have (at least) three organisations involved with national policy: DFHERIS, SOLAS, ETBI. In guidance we are an agency (comprising 7 staff) that are currently under two Government Departments. There is a lot of 'policy' and 'strategy' development [...] However - the implementation of policy is left completely to local organisations - thus, the uneven, inequitable issues and challenges noted."*

*"The cooperation between ministries is not relevant for real needs"*

The link between systems and actors is considered poor, chaotic, episodic, or absent, especially concerning some cross-sectional services. As far as guidance is concerned, for example, in the qualitative portion of the survey, two respondents stated:

*"The Irish model (AEGI/ AEGS) is a small and good model but in a (FET) landscape that has no coherence and is indeed likely to confuse rather than support."*

*"Often interventions are not designed in a network, so they are dispersive."*

Each sector is regarded as independent, with its own rules of operation by virtue of which it reproduces itself and prolongs its influence on the local level independently of the others. Every system operates within its cluster.

Because of these rules and the fragmentation of their missions, public systems perpetuate their dysfunctions. That is even more evident in policies addressed to disadvantaged groups whose learning needs can be met only through the coordinated action of different sectors.

One respondent refers to that by taking as an example what is happening in the adult correctional education system by referring to the scarcity of financial resources:

*"In Italy, there is little or no investment in adult education in prison, especially for education through art even when in the last 20 years this practice had demonstrated efficacy."*

### **Challenges**

The main challenge is related to the plurality of systems and sectors that tend not to talk to each other and duplicate activities and services or create inefficiencies for the potential impact of the overall offering. That is the result (of) and reveals different cultures of education and learning as well as profoundly different and inconsistent training strategies. Public policies should be designed considering three vital steps: setting priorities, advocating for quality, and ensuring social equity.

### **Opportunities**

Based on the great variety of existing systems, it is possible to promote their convergence and give rise to a holistic approach to adult learning policies. This approach should foster exchange among sectors, increase cooperation structures and create synergies for improving the educational conditions of the most disadvantaged groups of the population (e.g., the literacy demand of immigrant prisoners).

## **3.3. Investments**

According to the survey respondents, investments in adult education at the regional and local levels are there but spending goals and their adequacy to current and potential demand are problematic. 64.2%<sup>7</sup> consider these investments only sufficient to ensure basic supply and make the system work.

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<sup>7</sup> Data reported in this Chapter refer to the data processing methods as described in § 1.1.

However, 82.4% of respondents feel these investments are scarce to answer the existing demand. In particular, they believe that investments do not meet the complexity and variety of the needs of disadvantaged groups.

*"The importance of adult education continues to grow, but at the same time, it is becoming more difficult to reach the target groups. Better funding is needed."*

*"We need to connect more the investments with the territory's necessities."*

Moreover, public investment does not seem oriented towards the right priorities (76.8%).

*"Sometimes priorities change between the period when investment is planned and when implemented."*

In addition, there is a widespread opinion (80.3%) that their effectiveness and impact are reduced because:

*"Investments in adult learning and changes over time are not fully well-coordinated although they are referred to within different policies (social policies, employment policies, cultural policies, etc...)."*

The impact is further undermined by the fact that investments are often for projects of limited duration and limited audiences and thus do not achieve socially relevant goals. That is confirmed by a few respondents through their qualitative responses:

*"Not investments, but project funding opportunities."*

*"The public support to adult education is project-based since 2013 and not stable."*

*"State investment into adult education has been project-based since 2005."*

*"There are too few funding opportunities for outreach projects."*

As for regional and local investments for post-pandemic recovery, 119 respondents (or 72.1% of respondents) highlight the need for new investment plans. The types of intervention considered necessary are infrastructures, digitalisation (i.e., digital technologies and digital skills for adult education workforce), and thematic areas such as green transition, unemployment of young people, and modernising upskilling and reskilling systems.

*"The majority of investment into infrastructure is through public funding often in response to ring-fenced opportunities surfaced piecemeal and require an immediate response."*

### ***Challenges***

Adult Learning and Education systems appear to be underfunded and exposed to reduced or stagnating public investment. Moreover, public spending is oriented toward unstable and short-term priorities, which reveals a lack of attention to the social impact of public investment. That calls for an increase in spending as well as its redistribution towards new priorities to be pursued in the medium and long term.

### ***Opportunities***

Current investments allow the system to exist and provide a basic offering. Businesses and individuals show a propensity to invest in training. The strong potential in demand and growing need for skilled workers could produce a financial restructuring of public

investment that would allow a redefinition of short, medium, and long-term financial needs, planning, monitoring, and managing to secure needed resources in a consistent way.

### 3.4. Organisations

Adult education organisations everywhere play an independent role, complementing or replacing the tasks and commitments undertaken by the state. The survey shows that their existence and function are considered essential by both institutional representatives and adult learning professionals.

Therefore, public policies are necessarily based on the role plaid by AEOs. Even where the presence of directly managed public bodies is substantial - with respect to funding - AEOs are recognised as having complementary chores. The widespread provision of adult learning depends on them.

"I think in our specific field of adult learning and democracy education, providers of adult education could be more aware of the significant role they have in proactively supporting the development of active citizenship and sustainable development goals related issues."

The role of AEOs is significant both in terms of the audiences they can reach and the variety of issues they can tackle with the activities and services they provide.

*"Adult education organisations host the most committed and willing range of people and services."*

The capacity of AEOs to reach a wide range of audiences (particularly disadvantaged groups) and improve equity in accessing learning opportunities is recognised by 60.6% of

respondents<sup>8</sup>. That is a considerable number, but it highlights that, for almost 40% of them, there are shortcomings in addressing disadvantaged groups.

*"In Germany, the international and European work of the adult education active citizenship field is a catastrophe [...]. There is a handful of organisations - most in the field of classic Volkshochschulen and DVV international who do differently. But the field as such is not adequately taking over the responsibility, and a country with a well-established and well-funded adult education system should take over this responsibility."*

Many respondents recognise that some groups of the disadvantaged population remain excluded by the activities promoted even by AEOs. One example is prisoners and, particularly, those with a migration background. The learning opportunities for them are inadequate in relation to their demand. An obstacle to that demand being satisfied is the lack of public funds allocated to redistributive objectives, the weight of economic and financial constraints, and the structural barriers that inhibit the activities provided.

*"Adult education organisations try to improve equity, yet the outcomes are minimized due to external barriers."*

*"However, we struggle to support the necessary services and infrastructures financially as there is limited financial support."*

AEOs are committed to providing and managing activities relevant to participants and society at large. That is acknowledged by 60.9% of respondents, while a substantial percentage (39.1%) believe there are weaknesses in this regard. That is also evident when

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<sup>8</sup> Data reported in this Chapter refer to the data processing methods as described in § 1.1.

considering evaluations of the ability of AEOs to offer relevant learning opportunities also for employers: 48% responded in the affirmative. This capability is not generalised.

The quality of the supply of AEOs is related first and foremost to the knowledge, skills, and attitude of adult learning and education professionals. For 62.8% of the respondents, this is an area where further action is needed, especially on the part of public policies, since the in-service training of the adult learning and education workforce in the AEOs is up to the initiative of individual organisations.

*“Skilled adult education workforce is developed by providers but no government or regional strategy.”*

*"There is a skilled adult education workforce and further qualification opportunities, but there is not a proficient profile of the adult educator."*

Some room for improvement is verified in relation to public policies about AEOs. In this regard, the survey respondents highlight the consequences of some limitations imposed on AEOs: in particular, the funding stream through which public authorities steer their activities. The inadequate size and discontinuous nature of funding hinder the undertaking of a medium-term planning perspective and force AEOs to operate on short-term plans and programmes. That prevents functional investments which look beyond the implementation of specific funded projects or activities. In addition, there is another limitation of those public policies, namely their orientation with respect to content and objectives that do not always meet the needs of management and development of interventions. For example, in some countries, there has been a reduction in funding for outreach activities and low-threshold learning offer that are preparatory to the entry of disadvantaged groups into education pathways.

The relevance of the activities carried out by the AEOs is based on their ability to work in clusters and to develop cooperative networks with other institutions and organisations (from local and regional governments, schools, businesses, social partners, cultural

institutions, and associations of every kind to other adult education organisations). However, a large majority of respondents believe that network development and cooperation are areas for improvement. Enhancement needs are identified concerning each type of stakeholder or partner. In particular, for 73.7% of respondents, collaborative relations need to be strengthened with public authorities at regional and local levels. Compared to the other partners, areas that require more attention emerge concerning:

- private and social enterprises (78.9%)
- social partners (74.4%)
- other AEOs (63.7%)
- social and cultural organisations and services (63.5%).

Beyond even significant percentage variations (over 15%), the picture that emerges from the survey responses is that AEOs require decisive strengthening of their organisational capacity for cooperative work and networking.

The survey investigated respondents' expectations for the future in a 10-year outlook.

The expectation which prevails significantly (64.6%) is that by 2030 adult education organisations in their region and local community will probably or certainly be fewer in number. That is related to the expectation - shared by 52.2% of respondents - that the AEOs that will operate at that date will probably or certainly be more effective and will probably or certainly be able to make use of a more qualified workforce (51.6% of respondents).

The reduction in the number of AEOs, connected to their increased efficiency and better professionalisation of their workforce, is an expectation related to organisational contexts. That is particularly true for those more exposed to processes of concentration: competition between organisations and reduction of public funding, and possible prevalence of the more evolved and structured organisations. At the same time, large groups of respondents of all types (between 36% and 49% according to the items) do not expect substantial changes.

It is widely believed that if AEOs would like to meet the challenges of the next decade, they must equip themselves to address:

- a growing potential demand for adult learning and education that will expand the number of potential adults who want to enter training and expand the fields of training to new areas and settings;
- the challenge of balancing its focus on both adult education, training, and the development of skills to support social life;
- the need of establishing a more direct relationship with the labour market demand and the development of career management skills.

Again, respondents emphasise that this will be possible provided that the professionalism and professionalisation processes of the adult learning and education workforce are supported and financed.

### ***Challenges***

The main challenges for AEOS seem to be as follows:

- the risk of depending on public policies that cover only part of the needs, with insufficient and discontinuous funding
- the scarcity of forms of cooperation and coordination with other stakeholders
- insufficient types of strategic activities and services of common interest that are not widely available today and that reduce the impact of activities and increase their costs (outreach, guidance, career management, etc.).

### ***Opportunities***

The survey shows that there is a strong tendency to work towards:

- intentional change management of organisational strategies
- diversification of financing sources
- the development of a more professional adult learning and education workforce.

## 4. Adult learning and education offer, demand, workforce

### 4.1 Adult learning and education offer

In all countries, there is a varied range of services and training activities of a formal and non-formal nature that involves a significant percentage of the population.

The learning offer, although substantial, is still considered insufficient, especially considering the weak response to the potential demand of different types of vulnerable groups. The scarcity of free, affordable, and accessible public provision drives people to the private and, often, expensive adult learning market.

*"Participants often end up enrolling in costly private courses."*

*"Many people who are foreign nationals and have low levels of education need more training than what is offered to them."*

In all countries investigated, typical formal education activities addressed either the issuance of certificates and qualifications for professional (re-)employment or the basic skills provision with the purpose of developing paths within the educational and training systems are dominant. More attention is directed towards this type of activity and towards those addressed to up-skilling rather than re-skilling. Respondents consider this tendency a barrier to designing programmes and courses that meet the real needs of individuals, also those without previous training experience.

*"Education not only to reach PISA or other skills standards but to realize (or to support to identify) the adult's life project."*

In some countries, the focus on activities aimed at achieving certificates goes hand in hand with the tendency to reduce (leisure) course provision aimed at people excluded from those training opportunities. That is exacerbated by the lack of support for outreach activities.

In addition, there is an insufficient supply of activities favouring work-based learning among young people who are not employed and among workers, especially in small and medium-sized businesses.

All this reinforces the processes of exclusion of disadvantaged groups with "specific needs" that the public learning offer struggle to address.

The expressed opinions concern the overall assessment of the adult education offerings of the countries covered by the survey. Alongside respondents highlighting the critical points in the various countries, there are others that highlight results and trends that testify to the existence of processes aimed at guaranteeing an adequate supply of adult learning.

This positive trend concerns, in particular, the strengthening of the provision of basic skills to reintegrate people into a learning path for progressing in their education, career, and active citizenship.

*"In Norway, Competence Plus is a grant scheme that will contribute to more adults, through training in basic skills, being able to take part in further education and training and strengthen their participation in working life and society. It is a weakness that this is a national scheme rather than a regional scheme that meets regional needs."*

## 4.2 Adult learning and education demand

The development of the ALE market emerges everywhere as the object of respondents' attention. However, the opinions highlight the inadequacy of dedicated instruments to know and respond to the learning needs of individuals and the marketplace. The focus on demand is weak, and, as a result, the supply design does not take this criterion into account either.

*"There are no local/regional needs assessments."*

*"There is an absence of a mechanism for the training needs diagnosing."*

These are instruments implemented only in limited education fields, such as vocational and educational training (VET). But VET can also have weak connections to the labour market.

*"Public VTIs [Vocational Training Institutes] have little, if any, connection with the labour market."*

The ability to plan an ALE provision that takes into consideration medium and long-term forecasts is equally weak. That makes it particularly problematic to align the adult learning and education offer with the demand for skills related to the evolution of the labour market resulting from economic and social innovations.

*"There is no funding for forecasting labour market skills' needs."*

*"Adult education programmes exist. However, they are often not in line with market needs or do not anticipate market trends, so they are again late."*

The mismatch is not just about the relationship between supply and the skills required by the labour market. This trend inevitably also affects the peculiarity of the ALE demand of the most vulnerable groups of the population. Also, in this case, a standardised offering prevails and lacks personalisation and customisation.

*"There is a dearth of knowledge about the needs and opportunities for vulnerable groups and how training can be tailored to the individual's learning opportunities."*

This mismatch between supply and demand is mitigated in countries where predictive instruments for labour market skills needs exist. However, even in these cases, the availability of data and information does not always translate into an alignment of supply and training demand:

*"There is a mismatch between skills forecast and education provided"*

The tendency to disregard forecast data, even where they exist, is emphasised by several respondents. The planning process does not seem to be influenced by the analysis of the demand but rather by the tendency to propose a predetermined offering defined on the basis of the resources and skills of the providers. That also reflects negatively on the propensity to make learning offers flexible and to innovate its content and delivery methods.

*"Providers offer courses depending on the funding programmes and not on identified needs."*

*"Private and public investment in all areas of adult education is done without central planning, needs assessment, action plan, and evaluation."*

That may appear to be a trend fostered by the fact that, in the field of publicly funded educational offerings,

*"...The financial and operational support for educational organisations is not provided to achieve this goal."*

This type of criticality is widespread, perhaps prevalent, but not generalised. Alongside opinions that point out the poor adherence of skills supply to skills demand, others highlight an alignment between the two, correlated to specific productive sectors. At the same time, there is evidence (31.8% of respondents<sup>9</sup>) of a trend toward fostering the emergence of new adult education and learning demands. This trend is linked to an innovative and flexible supply and new methods of management. This propensity is attributed primarily to private ALE providers by all kinds of respondents.

These elements affect the quality of ALE provision. For many respondents (62.3%), the low quality depends on the lack of mechanisms dedicated to the evaluation and monitoring of adult learning and education supply in a systematic way. Where those exist, the problem shifts to the evaluation subject, which is rarely centred on the participants' learning outcomes but rather on the process, namely the content and delivery methods.

*"No monitoring on quality of learning outcomes."*

*"At the same time, a lot of initiatives tend to be based on random opportunities and the hot topic of the day implemented superficially."*

However, some basic processes are implemented everywhere and, in particular, where activities are financed through public funds and thus involve stringent and pervasive procedures:

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<sup>9</sup> Data reported in this Chapter refer to the data processing methods as described in § 1.1.

*"Adult education is publicly funded, and the outcomes are assessed on a regular basis. Funding covers all aspects of the sector."*

However, the problem of shifting attention to learning outcomes is a trend toward which institutions and providers are turning their attention.

*"We are introducing new providers and focusing on outcomes to become more effective."*

Paying attention to the relationship between the learning and education demand and the learning outcomes achieved is also indispensable for allowing policies to base decisions and programmatic objectives on facts. Then, on this basis, policies can work to improve the supply and align it with individual and employment outcomes. Otherwise, as noted by some of the respondents, randomness and superficiality drive provider choices:

*"Evaluation is often the basis of new policy or initiatives, but at the same time, some policy initiatives are put into place with little or no empirical evidence to support it."*

*"Collecting more data on outcomes of funding for adult education to better target available funding."*

*"Currently there is a very strong drive on employment which, whilst important, fails to recognise the essence of social and economic impact. Adult education starts with aspiration and confidence, and progression pathways are key to achieving ultimate outcomes of health and well-being as well as potential employment or in-work progression."*

## 4.3 Adult learning and education workforce: professions, quantity, quality

The presence of adequately professionalised adult learning and education trainers and staff working in favourable conditions is the key to the future of adult education. 51,6% of respondents<sup>10</sup> believe that, in 2030, adult education organisations are likely to or will certainly have a more qualified workforce. 75.3% of respondents consider the availability of a well-qualified workforce will be significant for adult education organisations' sustainability or have a crucial impact in the context of the transformations expected from them by 2030.

The issue of professionalism and recognition of practitioners' role are considered as meaningful as the issue of funding. These issues appear to be the most widely shared views and the primary concerns of the large majority of respondents.

### 4.3.1. Training

62.8% of respondents believe that initial and continuing education for adult education providers is a widely shared need.

*"An adequate commitment to guarantee the development of skilled adult education workforce is missing."*

The first issue is the incoming selection. That is often not based on an assessment of the possession of specialised skills:

*"Many adult educators are not qualified: they work because there is a need. That will lead to big gaps in professionalism."*

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<sup>10</sup> Data reported in this Chapter refer to the data processing methods as described in § 1.1.

The random nature of recruitment processes is probably motivated by the absence of an adequate presence in the labour market of the adult learning and education workforce, endowed with the theoretical and practical skills required by the complexity of this profession. That explains the spread of opinions such as:

*“To some extent, I think part of the workforce is too far away from the actual activity and lacks the knowledge of how things are delivered to the participants.”*

On the other hand, it is a complex profession that is required to interpret, design, manage, and evaluate the educational and learning processes of a wide variety of populations, organisations, communities and for a wide range of ever-changing issues. In addition, there are new challenges that educational work must face in terms of content and methods (e.g., the digital transition). Therefore, many respondents believe that:

*“Support needs to be provided for a workforce that is constantly having to adapt to a changing world. Changes are accelerating, and the need for people working in adult education to be flexible and resilient is only going to get more important over the short to medium term.”*

### 4.3.2. Status

The widespread opinion among representatives of institutions and AEOs staff, as evidenced by the qualitative parts of the survey, is that the professionalism of the ALE workforce should be increased concurrently with the development of professionalisation processes. More specifically, that is true in relation to the reinforcement of their professional status, its recognition also by means of legal instruments, the improvement of the economic conditions, the introduction of basic standards to access the profession, and the support in their daily work. The role of the adult learning and education workforce receives *“poor recognition at a national and regional level”* that legitimises expressions such as *“we are absolutely invisible”*.

Even where there is a trend to attract new and young professionals with high levels of specialised skills, strengthening their professional role is necessary, possibly through legislative instruments that define and protect its quality and prestige.

At the same time, the professionalisation process must also include salary increases and better working conditions in general (adequate funds, support, social functions, quality of organisations, and the whole system). That is critical to overcoming the *“low level of social and economic recognition recognised to the adult education professional.”*

### ***Challenges***

The challenges relate to the desired transformations that address three main aspects:

- Recognition of the variety of professionals working in different roles in the field of adult learning and education and the quality criteria governing recruitment, access, and practice of the profession;
- The assurance of adequate initial and continuous training courses that guarantee basic and specialised skills corresponding to the variety of professional profiles;
- The guarantee of working conditions that correspond to the importance of the performed functions.

### ***Opportunities***

Increased demand for adult learning and education should be accompanied by increased investments and a greater focus on the return-on-investment (ROI) of training. That depends heavily on the quality of the adult learning and education workforce.

## 5. Disadvantaged groups

Disadvantaged groups are not the priority target audience for adult learning and education policies and investments. The prevailing opinion (78.5%<sup>11</sup>) is that there are no investments to meet the potential learning demand of disadvantaged groups. This view is shared by all types of respondents (institutional representatives from regional/local government and professionals from AEOs). Some also note the need not to focus exclusively on large categories such as the low-skilled and the low-qualified adults and emphasise the need to direct the attention of programmes and projects toward specific groups of the population usually neglected even by adult education. We refer, for example, to the "people with disabilities" or to the

*"LGBT+, Roma community, Traveller community, literacy/numeracy/computer literacy learners, people with learning disabilities, etc."*

As regards the type of organisations that must play a central role in the non-differential inclusion of disadvantaged groups, it is widely agreed (in responses to open-ended questions) that third-sector organisations are irreplaceable:

*"Third sector organisations working in the field of education make a great effort to maintain the quality of education with more precarious resources than the public service. Mostly they are aimed at a target that does not have resources and has needs, both social and educational."*

The public system of adult learning and education (including vocational and educational training) has a role that is considered complementary to the other stakeholders. Indeed, if outreach activities depend on the third sector (despite their insufficiency), the public system has the power to certify skills, including issuing degrees and professional qualifications.

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<sup>11</sup> Data reported in this Chapter refer to the data processing methods as described in § 1.1.

The access of different groups of the population to education and learning is hindered by obstacles such as:

- The economic and structural barriers associated with:
  - o the poor investment in "*vulnerable individuals*" (e.g., "*inmates*"), even though some regional governments have adopted financial measures to support access to training ("*Tuscany Region provides study vouchers*")
  - o architectural barriers ("*wheelchair accessibility is an issue*")
  - o the inadequacy of tools and technologies to provide "*remote training*".
- The provision of "*relevant*" education and learning offers:
  - o insufficient supply of basic skills development and VET opportunities (some respondents state the contrary, as they believe their regional governments are "*highly committed to upskilling and reskilling policies for adults*")
  - o lack of attention to potential demand for training (reported by 60.9% of respondents: "*educational programmes and teaching methods do not correspond to the expectations, beliefs and special characteristics of adults.*")
  - o the opportunities for progression in the educational pathway are limited. This possibility is primarily related to the chance of earning certificates and qualifications within the formal education and training system. That excludes the progression to developmental goals learners have for themselves, even though paths made up of non-formal and informal learning opportunities.
  - o the scarcity of outreach activities and information campaigns: "*it is very challenging to reach potential users.*"
- The lack of support services for
  - o informing and motivating potential participants as "*opportunities are not known, and people don't consider adult education useful*"
  - o the recognition of prior learning acquired in non-formal and informal contexts or official diplomas issued by non-European countries
- The possibility of freeing up time to devote to training (formal/non-formal)

- o Certain respondents declare that "*for the employed, there are study permits*"; others state that "*unemployed people can learn, but working people should also have possibilities to learn.*"

Policies aimed at disadvantaged groups are essentially related to active labour market policies (welfare, employment, security, training/re-training, etc.), which implies that only the (potential) working population can benefit from them.

These policies tend to prioritize up-skilling over re-skilling those who no longer possess the appropriate skills for the labour market and do not look at the personal development of the individuals<sup>12</sup>.

*"There have been massive cuts and, although there has been some investment (e.g., through the National Skills Fund), there needs to be less bureaucracy around the funding rules and re-skilling, not just up-skilling needs to be considered fundable."*

Active labour market policies, however, have the merit of linking labour policies with adult learning and education (where they are not limited to passive policies). This approach is not extended to other social policies (e.g., housing, health, culture, etc.) where sectoral strategies prevail. Disadvantaged groups need answers and integrated services that are, unfortunately, rare:

*"As a result, this is highly difficult since there are almost no answers to integrated and targeted approaches made to provide adequate to people and marginalised groups, groups at risk and with specific needs."*

### **Challenges**

Disadvantaged groups are not a priority of policies and investments aimed at adult education. Understanding how to progressively change this "educational disadvantage equilibrium" is the most significant challenge of our times. To avoid immobility of the quantity and quality of adult learning and education sector, economic and structural

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<sup>12</sup> Also called Bildung: "an individual maturing process connecting education, upbringing, knowledge, culture, and personal responsibilities towards humans and our globe". <https://eaea.org/project/bildung>

barriers decreased, while the relevance of the offer, support services, and incentives should be increased.

### *Opportunities*

The need to develop the capabilities and skills of the entire population, including disadvantaged groups, is at the heart of many acts of the European Union. The national implementation plans for the EU Skills Agenda should certainly tackle that. Research has provided operational guidance on where to intervene, and several best practices have given concrete suggestions on how to do so. In the medium term, a new political will might regain so that public intervention will contribute to correcting the unbalanced distributional effects produced by the current ALE public policies and private provision. In the short term, third-sector organisations are considered irreplaceable in increasing disadvantaged learners' participation in educational opportunities.

## 6. Governance

It is well known that there are different models of administrative decentralisation in Europe. Nevertheless, this diversity doesn't make the assessment of the set of models impossible. Respondents were asked to focus on the systems' functionality and evaluate the good governance in relation to adult learning and education policies.

Views on decentralisation models are divergent: among respondents who expressed an opinion, the ones who consider that there is a good balance of power between central and local governments or a high level of autonomy prevail (61.4%<sup>13</sup>). That could justify the assertion that local governments' capacity and resources are adequate to support adult learning and education policies. This percentage increases to 67.1% among those who hold public office or perform public functions.

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<sup>13</sup> Data reported in this Chapter refer to the data processing methods as described in § 1.1.

Other respondents (75, or 33.6% of the total) highlight excessive centralism in the power distribution. Perceptions of the marginality of local authorities relative to central power are most pronounced among professionals in AEOs (33.7%). If the negative opinion affects one out of every four respondents having public responsibilities or functions, this ratio rises to 1:3 among adult learning professionals.

However, 62% of policymakers and 75% of adult learning professionals consider the alignment between central and local policies weak. Accordingly, the existence of margins of autonomy of local governments can emerge from centralised systems. This assessment combines both the opinions of those who believe that the level of decentralisation is weak and those who value the capacity for the autonomous initiative of the decentralised authorities.

Coming to the structural assessment of the various national, regional, and local models, we can observe problematic situations in which decentralisation appears to be formal but not substantial:

*"We are facing a great paradox where funds and access are majorly centralised and targeted too many times to sterile employability promises while actual adult education is happening only through local autonomous and solidary actions."*

Or other cases in which, on the contrary, decentralisation is seen as a further complication of management processes:

*"With the merger of municipalities, a great deal of bureaucracy has arisen."*

All of this leads some respondents to value the ability to align central and decentralised powers in order not to weaken the overall action of the State:

*"The power is centralised, but also the awareness is centralised and not regionally dispersed."*

Nonetheless, as one respondent noted, "adult learning happens" anyway. This consideration makes sense because, by implication, it emphasizes that adult education is rooted within an

articulated field of dynamic, nonlinear systems that are only partly dependent on public policies.

Other considerations concern the horizontal dimension of governance, which is characterised by a high degree of cooperation and interaction between the State and other actors. These partnerships aim at shaping socio-economic structures and processes and solving problems of general interest outside of hierarchical decision-making models. To this end, policymakers interact with social actors that are in the position to advance the needs of the groups they represent and promote solutions on their behalf.

In the adult learning and education field, horizontal governance calls into question the ability of those who carry out public functions to establish forms of collaboration with a great variety of public, private, and private-social actors. Those are the ones that can make explicit the problems of the different groups of learners they represent and reach and contribute to implementing policies for growth, emancipation, and development in collaboration with the decentralised levels of government.

The collected opinions assessed the collaboration between regional/local governments and actors such as social partners, businesses, and adult learning organisations. Among those, a widespread dissatisfaction emerges about the ability to build and strengthen partnerships among the wide range of social actors involved in the field of adult learning and education policies, in some cases despite the efforts of local institutions:

*"Regional policymakers are committed to this."*

Regarding cooperation to promote participation with social partner organisations representing the interests of European workers and employers, 63.1% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction. This trend is confirmed by the data on collaboration between regional/local governments and social partners, considered weak and in need of being strengthened (75%).

A slightly lower figure (73.7%) reports the same opinion in relation to collaboration between decentralised government and adult education organisations. That is likely to be connected to the policymakers' lack of awareness about the opportunity (and benefits) of broadening

the range of actors participating in territorial consultation so that they contribute to policies ex-ante evaluations to align them with social issues and learners' needs.

The collected data highlight two specific weak issues:

- on the one hand, the need to strengthen the commitment of the local level of government to implementing policies and measures through social consultation is emphasised. This would be confirmed by the weight of those who consider collaboration with social partners positive and necessary (25%). Similarly, the limited involvement of social partners in national policy-making is highlighted:

*"While there is a high level of engagement on the level of the local authority, the state-level policies that have an impact do not sufficiently engage social partners, and thus limit local potential."*

The reasons for this tendency towards limited involvement of the social partners may stem from a mixed assessment of their representativeness in the development of educational policies at the local level;

- on the other hand, the percentage of those dissatisfied increases to 80% when opinions are expressed regarding the development of local partnerships between the decentralised powers of government and the productive world (private and social enterprises). That could be related to the total entrusting of the active workforce training to firms (except in some countries concerning various forms of apprenticeship).

In summary, horizontal governance is considered weak for three reasons:

- a) The difficulty of intermediary organisations in asserting the learning needs of disadvantaged groups within consultation processes and political committees,

*"Lifelong learning for adults is not seen as an important investment."*

*"Educating adults is not considered a priority in society."*

- b) The delay of policymakers in activating partnerships with the various segments of civil society that are poorly or not at all represented, especially in times of health emergencies where new problems come out or the unresolved ones are intensified,

*"(There is a) disinterest for unemployed (people)."*

*"(It) takes time for the system to change to actual needs and (the rapid) changes in society (i.e., Covid-19)."*

- c) The low propensity of public systems to build partnerships with other stakeholders in their areas of reference:

*"Capacity of CPIAs to read the territory and make agreements to cooperate with actors other than local authorities."*<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion,

*"We have to start a step earlier with concrete discussions on the actual needs of the community having the incentive and real will to act on these needs."*

### ***Challenges***

The challenges concern the ability of regional/local institutions to strengthen the participatory and coordinated mode of government by identifying the representative subjects of emerging and consolidated social problems, which can interpret, express and direct the process of conquest of educational spaces by eliminating risks of conflicts of interest and corruption.

### ***Opportunities***

The essential function of horizontal governance is capacity building. Fostering the implementation of complex, integrated policies requires the involvement of those who

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<sup>14</sup> CPIAs are the Provincial Centres for Adult Education in Italy.

will need to implement them and those that will benefit from them. Focusing on the demand for adult learning - both high- and low-skilled adults - when it is not limited to obtaining certification requires strong cooperation between multiple actors. Public institutions may use conditionality measures in the funding distribution to promote it. However, using horizontal governance to build the capacity of stakeholders (and, in particular, policymakers) provides a unique opportunity to accelerate and increase the consistency and integration of practices promoted by different stakeholders.

# 7. Internationalisation of Adult Education Organisations

Over a third of people did not participate in this part of the survey. This data requires a brief reflection because it highlights the existence of margins for improvement with respect to the objective of developing Europeanisation of strategies for the growth of the skills of the European population as a whole. The reasons could be due to:

- the weak legal binding power of the EU institutions in adult learning and education as the EU Treaties give exclusive competence in that field to the Member States
- a lack of interest in and knowledge of international level mechanisms, both financial and programming processes
- the priorities indicated by the management and/or the cost/benefit analysis done in each territorial context might not bring organisations to consider internationalisation an added value

*"Very context/dependent, all or none of the above can apply depending on the organisation and the meaning of "the internationalisation dimension."*

However, even if lower than expected, the number of respondents is still significant. The reasons why respondents believe adult education organisations should start internationalisation processes are<sup>15</sup>:

1. Develop and innovate through mutual learning processes (67%),
2. Access to international financing (50.6%),
3. Influence international policies (46.8%),
4. Globalise organisations and activities (45.5%).

Fifteen participants (3 politicians and 12 adult learning professionals) expressed additional arguments specifying further reasons: connected to migratory phenomena, processes of

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<sup>15</sup> Data reported in this Chapter refer to the data processing methods as described in § 1.1.

globalisation that affect businesses and local realities), and recalling factors that in some countries hinder these processes (e.g., the absence of the need to deal with "Europe" when national funding covers the operational needs of organisations, or the limits of promotion policies with respect, in particular, to the population over 19 years of age).

For each of the variables considered, no significant differences emerged in the distribution of opinions expressed due to the role of the respondents (representatives from regional/local institutions or professionals from AEOs).

**Mutual learning** and benchmarking between different regional/local governments and European organisations are the most popular reasons for starting an internationalisation process (67% of total respondents).

The survey results indicate that AEOs from all EU countries face similar problems. That likely accounts for the strong interest in mutual learning and benchmarking, and the existence of broad networks provides opportunities to select appropriate partners.

Increasingly stronger processes are underway to create integration and dialogue between national labour markets, partly facilitated by the spread of skills classification systems. ALE providers that operate on a supranational scale are also growing in the private sector.

Given the limited legal binding power in the field of adult learning and education assigned by the EU Treaties to the EU institutions (unlike that established for agriculture, monetary, foreign, competition policies, etc.), mutual learning is undoubtedly the simplest and most impactful result to achieve in this field. The views on this are explicit:

*"Because there is a real need to implement knowledge even outside the local reality."*

*"Because they can adopt good practice and so not everything must be developed from scratch."*

It is particularly significant that this interest outweighs the other objectives, primarily **access to funding**. European financial instruments and programmes are not seen as an alternative source of funding to national public ones by the respondents.

For instance, as regards basic education, the widely held view (68.8% of respondents) that community investment supply is adequate. This evaluation is more widespread among

regional/local institutional representatives (72.7%), whose position is 5.4 percentage points higher than the professionals' (67.3%).

European funds and specifically the ones that are managed on a national and regional level (i.e. European Social Fund) are considered a source of sustenance for AEOs regardless of their link with national and international policies and objectives. At the same time, respondents indicate that access to funding is discouraged by the difficulty in finding information regarding calls for proposals, the administrative rules, and the bureaucratic burden associated with funding management:

*“Call for proposals procedures are not always easy to manage for those asking financial support.”*

*“Although there has been some investment there needs to be less bureaucracy around the funding rules.”*

*“There is the need to lighten the bureaucratic and administrative burdens of the projects management”*

The possibility of **influencing European policies** is considered by 46.8% of respondents. The percentage is significant because it is an ambitious goal that can only be made explicit and pursued by people and organisations with high levels of awareness, a forward-looking vision, and an ability to manage networks of relationships and investment. The high percentage of respondents who did not consider this possibility is probably due to the absence of those conditions. In addition, it is possible that parts of the adult education community may not consider European international policies impactful as Member States remain responsible for ALE policies or the internationalisation process relevant to their daily work.

**Globalisation** of organisations and activities was considered by 45.5% of respondents. This objective can be perceived as significant, especially by organisations that can define their

global strategy, which crosses national boundaries. According to the respondents, acting on the global level can be beneficial for understanding the migratory phenomena, implementing peacekeeping actions, and providing meaningful continuous training for workers of all types and levels.

Operating on this scale requires the ability and willingness to extend their area of action into new markets and build joint venture processes with other similar or complementary organisations. Of the four challenges considered in the survey, this one is certainly the toughest, as it requires tackling local problems from a global perspective and going beyond organisations' comfort zone. Understanding the challenges and opportunities of globalisation, adopting a global strategy, and building the capacity of AEOs to open up to the world's complexity is not effortless.

*"This is reality as the world is internationalising."*

*"Because they need to understand the needs of migrants and the global community from a social perspective in order to integrate and cooperate respectively."*

### **Challenges**

The exclusive education competence conferred to the Member States by the EU treaties and the weak cooperation among them in this field are at the base of the difficulties in adequately developing internationalisation processes for local/regional AEOs and public authorities. Highly differentiated national models prevail in adult education, resulting in different cultures of adult education and hindering cooperation. International exchange among policymakers is discontinuous and not aimed at peer learning and policy transfer processes. To access European funding, influence EU policy initiatives, and adopt a global agenda, AEOs and public authorities need to understand the benefits and increase their awareness, competences, and will.

### *Opportunities*

The intensification of EU action in the adult learning and education territory creates new opportunities to understand its role and relevance: for instance, the amount of investment in adult learning promoted by Next Generation Europe, the ALE headline target of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the resurgence of attention in the 2016 Recommendation on adult learning and education, and the appearance of elements of adult education-related conditionality in the Country Specific Recommendations.

The recently adopted Marrakesh Framework of Action adopted at the Seventh International Conference on Adult Education by 142 Member States, the globalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises and migratory phenomena constitute opportunities for fostering AEOs' international strategies and action plans.

The existence of specialised European and international networks provides an opportunity to build partnerships, advocate before EU institutions and create joint ventures to work on global issues. Fostering these processes is also an opportunity for regional/local governments.

# 8. Conclusion

## 8.1 Challenges

Although all EU countries are committed to defining national strategic plans for the implementation of the “New Skills Agenda for Europe”, the adult learning and education systems appear to be underfunded and exposed to reduced or stagnating public investment. Moreover, public spending is often oriented toward unstable and short-term priorities. Public policies should act through long-term planning and not just through short-term projects and be more concerned about their impact on the different local and regional realities and their effectiveness.

The survey shows that there is a high demand to work towards:

- the definition of new institutional and organisational strategies
- the diversification of financing sources
- the development of a more professional adult learning and education workforce.

It seems that a coherent and comprehensive system of adult learning does not exist in any country of the RegALE partnership. Furthermore, actors tend to operate essentially through clusters of independent and uncoordinated providers.

In this context, AEOs are confronted with the risk of depending on public policies that cover only part of their needs, with insufficient and discontinuous funding. The scarcity of forms of cooperation and coordination with other stakeholders limits the possibility for AEOs to define and build up new sustainable strategies.

In order to guarantee a high-quality adult learning and education supply, it is necessary to urgently address and solve the crucial issues of status, role, professionalisation, and recruitment of the adult learning and education workforce.

Having adequate financial, human, and material resources is fundamental to changing the current "learning exclusion equilibrium" that places disadvantaged groups of the population out of the political priorities and investments aimed at adult learning and education.

To achieve this, it is necessary to rely on the ability of regional and local institutions to strengthen the participatory and coordinated mode of government involving a variety of social actors capable of contributing to the increase of participation in adult education and learning. Companies and social partners should be engaged to attain such a goal.

Highly differentiated national models prevail in adult learning and education in Europe, resulting in different cultures of adult education and hindering cooperation: challenges are similar, if not identical. Therefore, collaboration and benchmarking among stakeholders from all countries are necessary. International exchange among policymakers is discontinuous and not aimed at peer learning and policy transfer processes. To access European funding, influence European policy initiatives, and adopt a global agenda, AEOs and public authorities need to understand the benefits and increase their awareness, competences, and will.

## 8.2 Opportunities

The new European initiatives and programmes and the need to address the current economic challenges through adult learning and education can be seen as a historic opportunity to strengthen the role of public policies and their ability to promote the development of participation in adult learning.

Thanks to the great variety of existing systems, it is possible to promote their convergence and give rise to a holistic and coordinated approach to adult learning and education policies capable of improving the educational conditions of the most disadvantaged groups of the population.

Current investments allow the system to provide a basic offering. Coherent and forward-looking lifelong learning strategies are crucial for the development of adult learning and education policies to tackle “learning exclusion equilibrium”. The strong potential in demand and growing need for skilled workers could produce a financial restructuring of public investment.

It is necessary to encourage the promotion of a socially relevant and high-quality learning offer that is aligned with the - explicit and implicit - adult learning demand that is present at the local level.

The need to develop the capabilities and skills of the entire population, including disadvantaged groups, is at the heart of many acts of the European Union. The growing importance attributed to skills for life will strengthen the role of adult learning and, in particular, the non-formal offer.

In the medium term, a new political will might regain so that public intervention will contribute to correcting the unbalanced distributional effects produced by the ALE current public policies and private offer. In the short term, third-sector organisations are considered irreplaceable in increasing disadvantaged learners' participation in educational opportunities.

Fostering the implementation of complex, impactful, and integrated policies requires the involvement of those who will need to implement them. Using horizontal governance to build the capacity of stakeholders provides a unique opportunity to accelerate and increase the consistency and integration of practices promoted by different social actors.

The intensification of EU action in adult learning and education creates new opportunities to understand its role and relevance.

It is necessary to encourage the internationalisation of the various adult learning stakeholders so that mutual learning paths are developed, their experiences are enriched, and European strategies gain concrete substance.

The recently adopted Marrakesh Framework of Action adopted at the Seventh International Conference on Adult Education by 142 Member States (2022), the globalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises, and migratory phenomena constitute opportunities for fostering AEOs' international strategies and action plans.

European and international networks (like RegALE) provide the opportunity to build partnerships, advocate before EU institutions and create joint ventures to work on global issues. Fostering these processes is also an opportunity for regional/local governments.