



Adult Learning Policies in Europe. An Insight of Regional and Local Stakeholders

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- regional officers responsible for adult education and learning provision
- deputy Mayors involved in adult education and learning policies
- chairs of local adult education councils
- local officers responsible for adult learning and education provisions
- leaders of adult learning and education organisations
- managers of adult learning and education organisations
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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 designed 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 European 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 inability of policies to act in the long-term perspective. Furthermore, the belief emerges that policies focus on sectoral aspects and areas of adult learning, that originates patchy systems. Improvements could be achieved by adopting a more holistic approach and evidence-based policies.

- **Systems.** The respondents indicated that there is no European country where a comprehensive adult learning system endowed with shared values, principles, missions, functions, and concerted priorities exists. 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.

- **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.

- *Adult education organisations* (further AEOs). The opinions expressed within the survey highlight how AEOs can cover complementary, substitutive, or completely autonomous functions concerning public policies in lifelong learning. However, everywhere AEOs are given a central role that is more relevant than the role played by public institutions. That is because of the variety of fields in which they operate and their ability to include targets who are excluded from participation in ALE. The survey highlights some limits to be overcome that concern, in particular, the need to increase the relevance and the quality of the adult learning offer, specifically, 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. At the same time, demand for adult learning, skills for life, and closer relations with the labour market are expected to grow.

- *Adult learning and education offer 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 the surveyed European countries. According to the majority of respondents, the discrepancy between the training offer and the training demand is due to the lack of knowledge of current and future training demands by public and private stakeholders. This is also for European countries where there are dedicated forecasting services related to the evolution of labour markets and social innovations.

- *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.

- *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.

- **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 (33.6%) 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 and 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 of adult education organisations.** 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 RegALE¹ project (*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 culture in communities, cities and regions in the European Union.

The research 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 and regional level, ALE associations from

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

all over Europe, a university, and two networks- EAEA and EARLALL.

1. Introduction²

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.

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 (2015³). 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 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.

² Introduction by Paolo Federighi and Francesca Torlone.

³ 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