



UNION EUROPEENNE DE L'ARTISANAT ET DES PETITES ET MOYENNES ENTREPRISES
EUROPÄISCHE UNION DES HANDWERKS UND DER KLEIN- UND MITTELBETRIEBE
EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF CRAFT, SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES
UNIONE EUROPEA DELL' ARTIGIANATO E DELLE PICCOLE E MEDIE IMPRESE

UEAPME position paper on adult learning

General Remarks

UEAPME welcomes the attention the Commission pays to the issue of adult education. If Europe wants to be a knowledge based society, it urgently has to improve the participation rate of its citizens in lifelong learning with a specific focus on adults.

Importance of adult learning

Adult education can be seen as a tool to address various challenges facing the European society today, such as:

- The mismatch between the skills demand and the supply on the labour market
- The low participation rate of older workers in the labour market
- The high level of low skilled employees
- The demographic change
- Poverty and exclusion
- The lack of integration of immigrants

Nevertheless one has to be aware that adult education is not a magic bullet which can be expected to solve all problems and that the readiness and motivation of adults to learn should be prepared at an early stage. Therefore it is necessary to ensure consistency and continuation between initial training and adult education through a lifelong learning approach.

Labour market participation

While adult education has various objectives, one of the main purposes should be to increase the employment level and keep workers employable. Lifelong learning and more specifically adult education form an essential element of the flexicurity concept. In order to assure the employability of the workforce, workers need to continuously update their skills and competences.

While being aware of the benefits of adult education, there remain various obstacles which limit the participation in adult learning.

Obstacles to participation in adult education

The barriers to participation by individuals in adult education are manifold.

The Commission outlines in its communication “Adult learning: It is never too late to learn” some of the causes for the low participation, which are often:

- policy-related;
- informational (level of access to good and timely information),

- provider-related (entry requirements, cost, level of learning support, , nature of learning outcomes, etc);
- situational (the cultural value attached to education; the extent to which the life situation or the family and social environment of the adult supports participation)
- dispositional (the self-esteem and self-confidence of the adult as a learner, often linked to failure in previous educational experiences).

UEAPME agrees with the Commission that *demand-side reasons are often the most serious barriers: lack of time, due to work or family reasons; lack of awareness and motivation, as people do not see learning valued or rewarded enough and hence fail to perceive its benefits; lack of information on the supply and lack of financing.*¹

Motivation is the key denominator. As there are different reasons for participating in adult education (such as for professional reasons, for societal and for personal development), the level of motivation varies significantly according to the purpose of participating in adult education.

Unfortunately, there is a significant segregation in the uptake of lifelong learning. Mainly higher educated people participate in continuous education, while the participation rate of lower educated people is poorer. There is a need for creating a strong *European learning culture*.

Addressing these obstacles

Improving awareness and guidance

In order to achieve a *European learning culture* and increase the participation in lifelong learning, it is crucial that the benefits of lifelong learning are made clear to the individual workers and companies in particular by using the learning outcomes approach. This requires better and more accessible information and communication on the added value of continuous learning.

Moreover individuals and small organisations have a real need for guidance. They should be better informed on the existence and availability of training possibilities, but also better accompanied in their choices and the possible use in their daily life. Intermediate bodies such as craft chambers are key since they are locally organised, have direct contacts with the businesses and are present all over the country.

Furthermore, it is often forgotten that craft and small entrepreneurs also need continuous training, in order to stay competitive. However, the difficulties they face for participating in adult education, such as a very limited time schedule and lack of focused information on training offers, are not adequately addressed.

New educational methods

An important challenge in the field of adult education is the need to adapt the classical pedagogical methods to the specific needs of a population which has other demands than secondary pupils or students.

¹ Communication from the Commission Adult learning: It is never too late to learn

Adults, who are willing to learn, are more keen to make use of on the job acquired experience.

In most cases the current offer does not correspond to the high expectations of these groups of population.

Real efforts should be made to better adapt the training offer to a mature audience and to propose new pedagogical approaches and methods using new technologies and the knowledge of individuals.

Role of intermediary bodies in tailored made training offers for craft and small companies

Part of adult education concerns entrepreneurs and workers. In this case, the training offer is rarely adapted to the training needs of craft and small businesses. In a small company, training needs differ between the various employees and should be tailored made according to the needs of each individual.

In this respect, it is important to highlight the role of intermediary bodies as training providers such as professional organisations, craft chambers or other types of institutions, which can better respond to the training needs, as they are closely linked to the local level, and are aware of the required skills for companies and the labour market.

Intergenerational approach

Furthermore, while looking at adult education, one should not forget the link to initial education and training. If people do not receive adequate and relevant education and training before they enter the labour market, taking up adult learning will become less obvious and more difficult. Therefore increasing the attractiveness of initial VET and its uptake facilitate a higher participation in adult learning.

Role of the European level

The European Union sets itself the goal to have by “2010 the European Union average level of participation in lifelong learning should at least be 12.5% of the adult working-age population (age 25-64)”. Currently, there are huge differences between the Member States with variation from the EU average ranging from 1.1% to 34.7%.² UEAPME underlines the fact that actions need to be taken at national level.

Nevertheless, in a situation of such extreme variations, the use of peer review and exchange of good practises are suitable tools to address this issue at European level.

Facilitate investment in continuous training for adults

European Social partners have concluded in 2002 a Framework of Actions on the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications.³ As part of this they outlined the principle of shared responsibility between the different actors.

They also identified the need to ensure that the taxation of enterprises and individuals encourages investment in competencies development activities. The support from public authorities is crucial. SMEs in particular need support during the periods when some of their workers are absent in order to receive training.

² Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training – Report based on indicators and benchmarks – Report 2006, pages 35-40, and its Annex “Detailed analysis of progress”, chapter 6.2.

³http://www.ueapme.com/docs/pos_papers/2002/FINAL%20DSE%20Framework%20of%20actions%20EN.doc

Adult education should not be of the sole responsibility of employers. Each citizen has a role to play in his or her personal development. Public authorities are also key actors for an important part of the adult population not directly involved in the economy such as the inactive population, unemployed people, early retired workers, young people without qualifications, etc...

Concerning investment in adult education, UEAPME firmly believes in public-private partnership. Co-financing should be the guiding principle on this issue, where public funding could serve as a lever to attract private funds. This could be either by providing fiscal incentives for companies to invest into adult education or by creating individual learning accounts, which are supported financially by the public authority depending on the commitment of the individual.

As the need for continuous learning for adults will dramatically increase, public authorities should rethink their priorities in an overall lifelong learning perspective and shift the investment from other education and training areas towards adult learning. Since the relative importance of adult education will become more significant, it should also be accompanied by more efficiency.

Therefore, wherever public financing is used, transparency and efficiency should be the guiding principles. This is more likely to be successfully achieved in the case where education and training providers offer quality assurance.

The European level will play a decisive supportive role through its Lifelong Learning programme and by making the new European Social Fund available for the use of adult education. However, it is not only a question of quantity of investment but a question of quality of investment in education and training. Making national systems more cost/effective should be the main leitmotiv for all.

Conclusion

- Adult education is an important tool in addressing some of the challenges facing the European society, such as low employment levels, the demographic change, poverty and exclusion
- One of the biggest obstacles to participation in adult education is the lack of motivation
- One can clearly identify a segregation between higher educated and less educated citizens in the uptake of adult education which needs to be addressed
- Therefore providing information and guidance are important to enhance participation in continuous education and for Craft and SMEs intermediary bodies and professional organisations have a key role to play
- There is a need for creating a European learning culture
- New pedagogical tools for adult learning should be developed
- Investment in adult education is a shared responsibility between companies, individuals and public authorities
- Investment in education and training needs not only to be increased, but more efficient. Quality of lifelong learning measures is key for success of adult education.