ENGAGING NEW LEARNERS IN ADULT EDUCATION

Short guide for policy-makers and adult educators

www.oed-network.eu

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You can give people a chance to learn and develop through:

I. REACHING OUT TO POTENTIAL LEARNERS, ESPECIALLY UNDERREPRESENTED ONES

Non-formal adult learning can reach out to people. It opens the world of learning for many. To ensure this, learning needs to be adapted to the learner's requirements. Different target groups may ask for personalised measures to attract them back to learning. Therefore tailor-made learning offers are essential and special attention needs to be paid to the different under-represented groups.
Best practices show many innovative ways how to reach out and work with different learners, but adult education providers will need support for implementing new ways of working.
And even though the implementation is the responsibility of providers, policy makers need to make outreach and empowerment a policy priority so that real progress can be achieved.

1) Include learners' voices

All learners should have a say in their learning. In particular disadvantaged groups need opportunities to empower themselves and thus have an active role in their learning environment. Starting from regular consultation of learners to learners committees and advisory boards, there are many possibilities to include learners in the management, organisation and teaching of adult education organisations. Adult education providers have to be democratic and have a good understanding of their learners' needs.

2) Meet the learners in their environment

Learning does not always have to take place in a classroom setting. The first step in reaching out to learners may be simply to get them out of the house. Meet them in their environment, such as their homes, parks and community buildings. While new learning spaces can be challenging for the trainers, they might be very rewarding for the participants. Introduce the future learner to a social environment, in which s/he feels comfortable and which prepares for new learning experiences. Establishing spaces where participants can learn without fear or barriers is worth the effort. This is especially true for disadvantaged social groups.

The project "German in the park" involved four Folkhighschools schools in Vienna and was based on the realisation that courses often fail to engage migrants. Therefore: education has to come to the people. The public park was identified as the ideal place to hold the German language course because many people spend their spare time in public parks. The main aim of the project was not only to encourage participants but also to show learners that they are able to learn a language and could do so successfully. And secondly, that learning can take place in a relaxed atmosphere without fear. The courses thus strengthened learners' self-esteem and gave them the self-confidence to take part in education and learning situations. More information here http://www.vhs.at/lernraumwien/weitere-aktivitaeten/deutsch-im-park.html



3) Analyse and remove barriers

Barriers that keep people, especially disadvantaged groups, from participating in adult education need to be examined in depth. Adult education providers have to consider the accessibility of their premises and courses, such as the location, the timing and the settings of the learning offers. Make sure that your ways of communication about your course are not themselves barriers for the learners. For example you will not reach persons with reading difficulties through a written leaflet or website. Additionally national providers and decision makers need to analyse their legal and financial frameworks in terms of promoting or hindering the participation of disadvantaged groups.

The Swedish Sundsvall Folk High School invited women, mostly from Muslim countries (Chechnya, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan, Republic of Macedonia, Sudan), to join a study group to learn about Swedish life and society. The target was to create a safe meeting place for women from different cultures. The invitation was made in writing and was translated by authorized interpreters. It was addressed to the women but also to their husbands to avoid that the husbands would feel excluded in the process.



4) Enable progression

Lifelong learning is a continuous transitioning process and does not stop when a programme has come to its end. Adult education supports learners in their learning - and work paths, relevant to personal circumstances. Links, progression routes, guidance and signposting to in, non-formal and formal learning opportunities as well as the labour market should be provided. The educational process can include visits to community meetings, workplaces, unemployment offices, cultural houses, libraries, hospitals, social organizations, and political parties etc. It is essential to focus on learning outcomes and to make visible what has actually been learned and how the learner can use these new competences in different contexts.

5) Increase diversity in adult education

Staff members, managers and facilitators from disadvantaged groups are essential in order to ensure the necessary diversity in adult education but also for being role models for potential learners.

The adult school of "La Verneda-Sant Martí" in Spain is democratic, pluralistic and participatory. Learners are involved in the process of decision-making and in the monitoring of activities. The diverse organisational structures ensure participation on different levels: the General Assembly, the Council, the Learners Association, the monthly coordination and the weekly coordination. Democracy is the school's participatory model so that all learners can participate on equal terms through dialogue. All decision-making processes are equal through information, consultation, consensus and openness to everyone. More information here http://www.edaverneda.org/edaverneda/en



6) Use adult learners as mentors

Mentors or learning ambassadors encourage people to engage in adult education. Therefore it is essential to facilitate the work of positive role models in supporting adults to participate in adult learning. Especially socially disadvantaged adults will return to education and training because of support and positive learning examples. Additionally the mentors are learning themselves and gaining self-confidence too.

In the project "Migrants teach migrants" of the Mannheim Adult Education Centre (Germany) migrant women were trained to become mentors and to support trainers in German language courses. The mentors received training in presentation and moderation techniques and inputs from experts on various topics (such as health, food, education) as well as learned how to prepare lesson plans and exercises. Subsequently, they passed on their acquired knowledge to participants in integration courses. At the end of the three-year project, the mentors were involved in developing the concept for an evening course for the target group of migrants with little language skills in German/Turkish, German/Arabic and German/Russian. Furthermore, the mentors worked on a concept for a course for elderly migrants and for a course on the recognition of foreign qualifications.



7) Have the best trainers and staff

The development of staff capacities through high quality education and in-service trainings is a priority. Thus the training of trainers working with disadvantaged groups needs to be supported and best quality to be ensured. Consideration of the costs and benefits of trainers' working conditions is necessary, especially of those working with disadvantaged groups.

8) Use innovative and empowering methodologies

Managers, course designers and practitioners in adult education institutions need to adapt their methodologies to the diverse target groups they are working with, especially to those learners, which have particular learning needs.

The OED Network (Outreach – Empowerment – Diversity) published methodology guidelines, which aim to support the empowering work with socially and educationally disadvantaged groups. They have been put together by training and adult education specialists from 14 European countries and have been successfully tested in a number of European countries. Have a look at them here http://oed-network.eu/doc/OED-EN.pdf.



9) Prioritise and invest in adult learning

Increased public investment in learning for adults that ensures long-term funding for adult education, including the voluntary and community sector, is needed. This will benefit both learners and communities – better skills, more participation, more active citizenship and more social cohesion are a win-win situation. Communities are essential when it comes to including potential learners who have had the least opportunities in the past.

10) Strengthen non-formal adult education structures

In quite a few countries, there are social inclusion strategies for disadvantaged groups but they do not take adult education into account. Stronger structures for non-formal adult education through legislation, institutional development and continuous financing are needed in order to establish and sustain the work of this sector. By integrating adult education into existing initiatives and policies, these will be improved because non- formal adult learning is much more flexible in responding to learners' needs and interests than other forms of education.

II. UNDERLINE THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING

Adult education affects people's lives in ways that go far beyond what can be measured by labour market earnings and economic growth. Adult learning plays a significant role in promoting personal, social and economic well-being and value. Benefits include areas such health, civic engagement and social cohesion, attitude change, (educational) progression, crime, parenting and poverty reduction. Nevertheless, important as they are, the wider benefits of adult learning are neither currently well understood nor systematically measured. Decision-makers tend to underestimate the possibilities of non-formal adult learning.

1) Focus on the benefits for the learners

R ecognition of the importance and wider benefits of non-formal adult and lifelong learning is needed. The benefits of adult education go beyond the economic and employment-related, extending to social benefits, higher self-esteem, and well-being. Therefore: deliver a positive message, promoting the personal, social, environmental and intergenerational benefits of adult learning. Demonstrate that adult learning is not confined to any particular group of people and form of learning.

In Ireland, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) created a national TV Advertising Campaign. The TV and cinema advertisements portrayed three individuals (a train driver, a mother and a hairdresser) who had addressed their literacy difficulty and wanted to encourage others to take the first step. The ads focus on the benefits of returning to further education, as well as demonstrating that this issue is not confined to any particular demographic segment. Find more information here www.nala.ie/what-we-do/improve-literacy/advertising-campaigns



2) Find out more about the wider benefits of adult learning

As there is a lack of evidence on the benefits of adult education, especially those not linked directly to the labour market, further research on the wider benefits of adult learning should be encouraged. Until recently, much of the evidence on the benefits of adult learning was anecdotal, even aspirational. While there were serious studies of the benefits of schooling, further and higher education, relatively little attention had been paid to the benefits of learning in adult life. Furthermore, there was a well-established tradition of research on the economic returns of education but the idea of social and personal returns from learning was relatively under-researched.

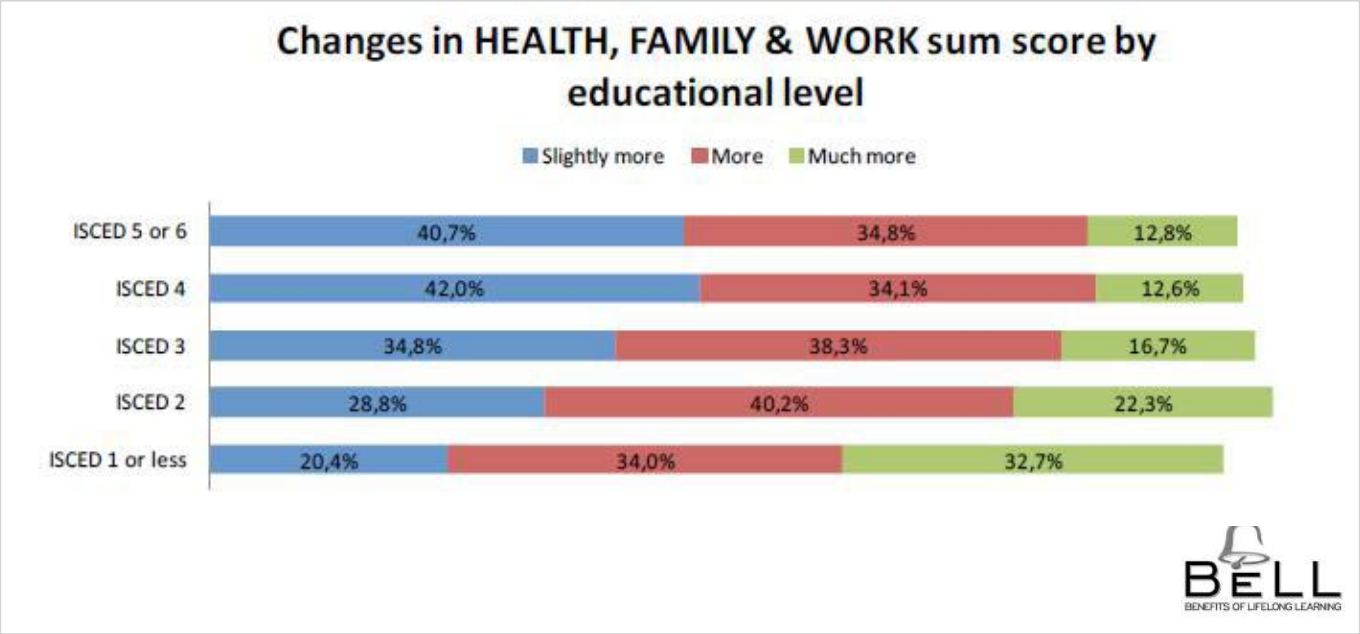
One of the first attempts to fill this gap was done by the BeLL project (co-founded with the support of the European Commission). By collecting and analysis qualitative and scientific data from 10 countries, the BeLL study aimed to investigate the individual and social benefits perceived by adult learners who participated in non-formal, non-vocational, voluntary adult education courses.

BeLL
BENEFITS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

3) Recognise Adult learning as a tool for social cohesion

Research (such as the above-mentioned BeLL project) shows that persons from disadvantaged groups experience more positive changes; in other words, they benefit more from their participation in adult learning. For example persons with lower levels of formal education report positive changes in motivation, feel more confident as learners and more often encouraged others to learn as well. This means that adult education can narrow gaps between different social groups and is therefore an important "equalizer" of well-being and learning opportunities. Adult learning is likely to increase the probability of future participation, particularly for those who have had poor previous educational experiences. Therefore it is a good low threshold learning service motivating especially lower educated to study further.

All respondents with different educational background experience changes, but especially the respondents in the lowest ISCED level (primary education, or first stage of basic education, or less) report bigger changes than others (32,7 % versus 12,8 %).



4) Establish coherent lifelong learning systems through validation and recognition

It is of high importance to set up and support an integrated system on recognition and validation of all kinds of learning by, for example, including non-formal learning in National Qualifications Frameworks. Real lifelong learning systems, which include increased exchange and equality between formal, non-formal and informal education and learning, are needed. Validation is a key tool in order to promote lifelong learning, to ensure more flexible learning pathways, to encourage learners and build their self-confidence as well as to create a more comprehensive understanding of competences.

5) Develop higher quality and innovation in adult education

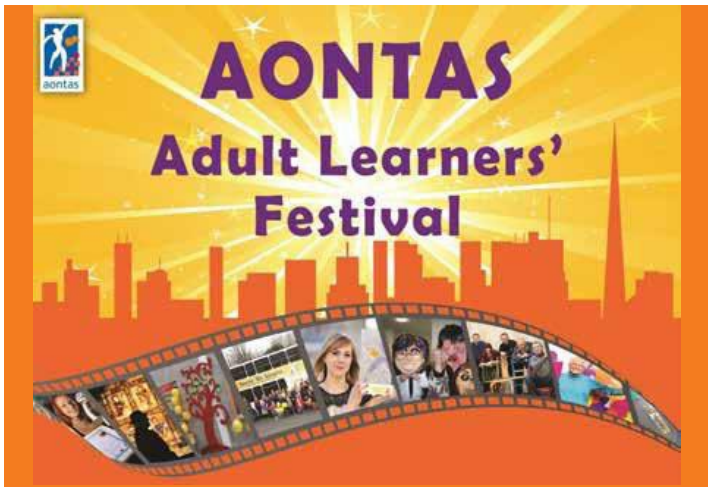
A European quality framework for the adult education sector based on good practices, methodological guidelines and innovative approaches is needed. The wider benefits of learning should be included in quality criteria for adult education. This framework needs to take the specific non-formal nature of adult education into account and encourage the learner-centred principles of outreach, empowerment and diversity.

III. RAISING AWARNESS FOR ADULT LEARNING

All over Europe adult education organizations and providers are working to raise awareness for adult learning and education. Campaigning for adult learning is a key priority at national, regional as well as European level. This might include taking politicians on a bus tour, producing TV-ads that motivate adults to learn basic reading and writing or organising a learner festival. "Enthusiasm for learning is the goal. But enthusiasm is also an important tool for raising awareness of adult learning." (ARALE Conference)

1) Organise Lifelong Learning Weeks and Learner Festivals

National learner festivals and lifelong learning weeks are about showcasing the work of adult education providers and promoting the work of the adult education sector. Also it is about celebrating adult learning and the achievements of adult learners. It aims to highlight the social value of adult education and the fact that learning happens in many different places. In addition to creating public awareness, festivals ensure that adult education is placed firmly on the political agenda.



2) Involve the Learner in Campaigning - Use Learner Stories and Positive Role Models

Learners are the best advocates for adult education. Campaigns to encourage greater participation in adult learning should use learner stories, which will convince new learners to join the learning process. Role models, such as learners from various communities as well as celebrities, are great motivators for adult learners. At the same time this will ensure the empowerment of the involved learners.

The aim of the Scottish "Formula Mentoring" project is to support adult learners from socially and economically deprived communities to participate in education, with the help of mentors. Mentors find a common interåest with their learner, go to museums and educational institutions, bring them to a university, attend sport events, go for a walk, etc. Many of these mentors are volunteers from the local community, who decided to participate in the project because it encourages their self-confidence and self-esteem. Another objective is to develop material for the training of mentors.

FORMULA
supporting adults in education

3) Focus your campaign on the benefits of adult learning

Campaigns to encourage greater participation in adult learning should emphasise the positive benefits that evolve for learners instead of making negative connotations. Existing networks of providers and practitioners as well as national and local policy makers are used to disseminate positive research results and learning outcomes, which will inspire and motivate new learners.

4) Adapt best practises from other countries

Have a look at what other countries do, how campaigning for adult education is done and how they succeed. There's no need to 'copy' other countries but ideas and elements of campaigns can be implemented in your country, taking into consideration the cultural and historical differences.

5) Convince policy-makers

When addressing policy makers, be sure that you are have found the right person to target, such as if s/he is influential in the right place and time as well as sensible to adult learning. Prepare yourself when meeting them: know them well and put yourself in their shoes to know what is interesting for them as well. Be brief and clear; provide concrete facts and statements such as research results, which underline the benefits of adult learning. Have a learner story, one point, one concrete proposal – that is easy to explain. And finally be prepared to define concrete suggestions, such as project that they can support and a policy document to be adopted.

The Swedish Adult Education Association invited a parliament committee for a bus tour to see what non-formal adult education really can do for people. The bus stopped in three different places during one morning, presenting different types of learning. The objective was to give deeper information about the study associations and show some activities, in order to maintain the governmental support for adult education.



6) Increase (civil) dialogue for lifelong learning

In order to make all kinds of learning possible, we call for partnerships at different levels (European, national and regional). Participation of and dialogue with all relevant stakeholders (social partners, learning providers, NGOs, etc.) must become a regular part of decision-making and policy development. A close cooperation with civil society organisations, including representatives of learners, is particularly needed.

SOURCES:

Awareness Raising for Adult Learning and Education (ARALE) Project:
http://www.eaea.org/en/projects/eaea-coordinated-projects/arale.html

Outreach – Empowerment – Diversity (OED) Network:
http://www.oed-network.eu

Benefits of Lifelong Learning (BeLL) Project:
http://www.bell-project.eu

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