



Committee of the Regions

**EDUC-IV-019**

**75th Plenary Session  
18-19 June 2008**

**OPINION  
of the  
Committee of the Regions  
on the  
ACTION PLAN ON ADULT LEARNING –  
IT IS ALWAYS A GOOD TIME TO LEARN**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- recalls that in many Member States, the regional and local level is responsible for adult learning and it is at local and regional level that education and training decisions are taken and put into practice. Therefore, the actions proposed in the Action Plan should also be carried out at local and regional level where appropriate;
- notes that adult learning, in particular, makes an essential contribution to employability, mobility, social inclusion and personal development through the promotion of the acquisition of key competences for all;
- recognises that the benefits, affirmation, and unblocking of personal potential of adult learning has a significant "value added" effect on many other aspects of participants' social, vocational, civic, cultural, and economic lives. Adult learning programmes, based on partnership principles and processes are a major source of individual and community empowerment;
- supports and will actively contribute to seeking to ensure that the necessary financial, human, administrative and other resources are provided to realise the ideal of increased and deeper participation by European citizens in adult learning;
- wishes to ensure that local and regional providers and stakeholders are involved as partners at all stages, in particular, at policy development, governance structures and delivery systems;
- regrets that although the European Commission calls for ensuring adequate levels of investment in, and better monitoring of, the adult learning sector, both the public and private sectors currently provide inadequate funding in the field.

Rapporteur

Mary Shields (IE/UEN-AE), Member of Cork City Council

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions  
Action Plan on Adult learning - It is always a good time to learn  
COM(2007) 558 final

## I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

#### *General Comments*

1. welcomes the broad concept and process of adult learning in the Commission Communication on an "Action Plan on Adult Learning: It is always a good time to learn" and endorses the central and key focus on the "adult learner" in the document;
2. recalls that education and training are critical factors for growth and development at local and regional level as well as achieving the Lisbon Strategy's objectives. Adult learning, in particular, makes an essential contribution to employability, mobility, social inclusion and personal development through the promotion of the acquisition of key competences for all;
3. Adult learning is of major importance for Europe's future. Flexicurity recognises that the traditional culture of "a job for life" is over. In addition, technology is changing faster and faster, requiring continual "re-education" at all ages to keep pace with skills requirements, and life expectancy will also increase. In this future environment, adult learning is vital, for individual betterment as well as for the economic success and social cohesion of Europe;
4. refers to the main tasks of adult education, as identified by the OECD: to improve competences, promote self-fulfilment and more solidarity in society, and enhance social (community) action;
5. endorses the key benefits of adult learning to European citizens; community development; economic prosperity and competitiveness; promotion of social inclusion; personal empowerment; and the promotion of socio-civic integration as an integral phase in a developmental life path, and welcomes the identification of three *key elements* as being vital to an effective and efficient adult learning sector: Policies, Governance and Delivery systems;
6. agrees that adult learning should fall within the framework of lifelong learning, so that the policies planned in the area are in line with the strategies drawn up for lifelong learning;
7. supports the identification of, and implementation schedule for, five key areas on which to focus the measures included in the proposed Action Plan;
8. considers that the proposed Action Plan has the potential to integrate and elevate adult learning for target groups, financial and resourcing implications, research and professional development, and managing the diversity of European learning traditions;

9. agrees that the holistic integration of these aspects (in Point 4) and the linked Action Plan positively positions adult learning in Europe in a proactive, reflective, learner(s)-driven, and policy-inspired phase of expanded development;
10. recalls that in many Member States, the regional and local level is responsible for adult learning and it is at local and regional level that education and training decisions are taken and put into practice. Therefore, the actions proposed in the Action Plan should also be carried out at local and regional level where appropriate;
11. notes with approval the sustained use of the concept of "adult learning" in the text. The broad and inclusive concept of "adult learning" *per se* indicate the value of personal engagement in learning; the myriad of formal/informal learning events in citizens' lives; emphasises the developmental benefits of engaging positively with our changing European environment and realities; and "manage" effectively our diverse destinies;
12. considers that the development of diverse adult learning will be more effective and efficient when learners are viewed as acquirers/transmitters/creators of "knowledge" and recognises that the proposed Action Plan seeks to operationalise this concept in a coherent manner;
13. believes that adult learning encompasses a multifaceted conceptualisation of inter-related elements, knowledge skills and attitudes, perceptions, understandings, etc. Adults have many and varied life experiences, their learning is enriched when they are involved, show self-responsibility in learning, and feel accepted, engaged, and supported in "mutually respectful" learning environments. The social relationships of all participants (learners, teachers, facilitators, administrations etc.) play a very significant role in personal capacity for effective adult learning engagements;
14. recognises that the benefits, affirmation, and unblocking of personal potential of adult learning has a significant "value added" effect on many other aspects of participants' social, vocational, civic, cultural, and economic lives, as well as enhancing its cross-generational and intergenerational aspects. Adult learning programmes, based on partnership principles and processes are a major source of individual and community empowerment;
15. recalls the importance the CoR attaches to the acquisition of key competences by all European citizens, especially in terms of their ability to lead an independent lifestyle and gain self-esteem. The EU's key competences is ideally suited as a reference framework for the development of such competences, not least at regional and local level. Adults must be able to update their key competences throughout their lives and special focus must be given to target groups that have been identified as priority groups in a national, regional or local context. Local and regional initiatives to inform, involve and motivating these groups will make an important contribution here, with a view to providing a range of education geared to the needs of people in the area;

16. supports the breadth and depth of adult learning activities (formal/informal) in the proposed Action Plan, the range of learning dimension, and the formative approaches to learning evaluation which reflect a Multiple Intelligences (MI) construct and process;
17. supports and will actively contribute to seeking to ensure that the necessary financial, human, administrative and other resources are provided to realise the ideal of increased and deeper participation by European citizens in adult learning;

#### *Learning Partnerships*

18. notes that, when properly organised, adult learning can actively contribute to integration. It is a way of integrating immigrants into their new home country and offers the resident population an opportunity to learn new cultures and languages;
19. welcomes the reference throughout the communication on the importance of "partnership" as an animating principle and process aspect of socio-personal engagement(s) in adult learning. Learning partnerships are symbiotic processes and are already reflected in a diverse range of educational responses to adult learning throughout Europe;
20. underlines that a learning partnership approach:
  - has a rich motivational value for individual learners and groups of learners;
  - provides a firm basis for parity of esteem of all stakeholders;
  - forges two-way communication and mutual respect;
  - contributes to the professionalisation of the adult learning process; and
  - is a crucial factor in promoting higher and deeper participation levels with a range of "excluded" persons and groups;

21. supports learning partnership's very valuable contributions to future adult learning in Europe and suggests to the Commission that "action planning" be based on identification of appropriate principles and aims; delineation of good practice partnership aspects from existing adult learning in Europe; integrate these findings in learning materials; and co-design and co-develop appropriate quantitative and qualitative evaluation procedures;
22. considers that this empowering "cascade process" could feature as an enduring aspect of European adult learning. This is consistent with underlying EU aims and endorses the role and contributions of local and regional stakeholders in an integrated process;

#### *Participation/Non Participation in Adult Learning*

23. welcomes the importance attached in the communication to broaden and deepen participation in a spectrum of life long learning "events" by all European citizens, and in particular by targeted "non/low participation"/excluded persons and groups, such as low-literacy persons,

older people, socially excluded groups, disabled persons, early school leavers, low skilled workers, older workers, migrant workers, etc.;

24. recognises in this respect that exclusion from, and non participation in, the learning process constitutes a significant first step towards future marginalisation, often followed by patterned "exclusion" from employment, socio-civic and cultural life;
25. supports the contention that an integrated approach is necessary to redress patterned under-representation in adult learning of a wide range of individuals and groups and to establish a culture of learning on a continuous basis for all citizens;
26. considers, furthermore, that this is not an easy, cheap or rapid challenge and is best seen as a form of personal and socio-educational investment and engagement which requires it to be embedded at personal, professional, local, regional and national levels;
27. wishes to ensure that local and regional providers and stakeholders are involved as partners at all stages, in particular, at policy development, governance structures and delivery systems, as responsibility for the delivery of adult education systems resides at regional and local levels in many Member States and the local/regional commitment to workplace skills development, community integration, civic literacy, cultural integration, adaptation to changing socio-personal circumstances is well demonstrated;
28. urges the social partners to ensure that adult learning needs are taken into account in collective agreements;
29. notes that gender equality must also be taken into account when developing adult learning. Whilst there are regions where attention needs to be focused on women, there are many countries where it is actually male participation in adult learning which is lower, especially in Community development type programmes;

#### *An Efficient Adult Learning Sector - Policy*

30. supports the European Commission's view that there exists a key need for local and regional authorities to engage in positive, symbiotic adult learning interventions with other stakeholders, in order to provide learning opportunities *with and for* "at risk" individuals and groups;
31. stresses that adult education is a key instrument for joining up various policy areas at local and regional level, for example in linking educational, social, labour market, growth and integration issues;
32. agrees that work based learning provides a very positive and "ready-made setting" for such interventions which has the potential to enhance personal-organisational learning, skills

development, foster the growth of "learning organisations" and a climate of continuous learning and lead to the development and implementation of effective strategies for dealing with change at several levels;

33. further considers that the workplace provides a rich forum where potential participants in adult learning are already *in situ* and that the actions necessary to encourage participation in workplace learning will be influenced by a wide range of variables<sup>1</sup>;

#### *An Efficient Adult Learning Sector – Research*

34. agrees with the Action Plan consultation process statement that "compared to other areas of learning, the contribution and benefits of the adult learning sector are not well researched, debated or published" and considers that an integrated and focussed research process could guide the achievement of the five key messages in the adult learning communication;
35. welcomes the benefits that quality, focussed research will make to the realisation of the Action Plan objectives, as it feels that a "feed back loop" of learning, insights and materials for all stakeholders would strengthen the basis of the effective and efficient delivery of adult learning;
36. further considers that better European research in the "participants" area would move from the dependency on comparative data and analysis from other systems, especially the USA, in order to guide appropriate responses to the participation issue in the European Union;
37. proposes that in order to guide various elements of the Action Plan, the following research should be conducted in a "feedback loop" process on issues such as: the identification and role of possible factors influencing participation/non participation in European adult learning; including general contextual and social background factors, related behavioural/situational factors and related personal attitudes and dispositions, European learners' motivational orientations, learning styles, and attitudes to adult learning, the return on investment (financial, personal, community, regional, vocational, etc.) of engagement in adult learning and the perceptions, attitudes/insights of low participating target groups in Europe; the profile of teachers involved in formal adult education processes and their initial and ongoing training;

#### *An Efficient Adult Learning Sector - Governance*

38. notes that the consultation process associated with the communication identified the importance of good governance in adult learning as being characterised, *inter alia*, by a focus

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<sup>1</sup> Variables include: (i) previous educational experience/perceptions of the target groups; (ii) participants' motivational orientations and "learning styles" (iii) the extent and nature of partnership in the learning fora; (iv) the range and quality of adult support systems, guidance, peer learning; (v) validation and recognition of formal and non-formal adult workplace learning; (vi) the relationship of adult learning to participants' socio-personal needs, and (vii) the employment of wide-ranging innovative learning approaches, especially aspects such as peer mentoring and support, a positive psycho-social learning environment, etc.

on the adult learner; innovative approaches to learning; effective learning needs analysis; local and regional planning; and the need for a planned and systematic approach at all levels and within all elements of adult learning, formal and informal;

39. welcomes the centrality accorded the adult learner in the governance section and notes with approval the value attached to local and regional contributions in an adult learning partnership framework;

*An Efficient Adult Learning Sector – Delivery*

40. agrees that the challenge for adult learning in an expanded Europe of 27 Member States is to "deliver a service" that can, at the same time, incorporate adult learners' motivations, interests and needs changed/changing labour market demands; societal requirements; and seek to redress and overcome, with interrelated actions, multi-dimensional barriers to participation;
41. points out that effective networking with second level schools not only makes for cost-effective learning provision but is also important in familiarising young people with adult learning. In this way, young people become aware of adult education centres at an early age and, when the time comes, they are then able to use such centres effectively to meet their own needs;
42. believes that by pooling resources intended for the education and training of young people and adults it is possible to respond in a comprehensive and flexible manner to the changing labour requirements of the workplace, the specific needs of adult education and the demand for qualified teachers and to improve the cost-effectiveness of the education system;
43. welcomes the series of measures outlined in the consultation process relating to participation in adult learning, as they reflect international good practice and suggests:
- an initiative in Community-Workplace Adult Basic Skills (CWABS), to better utilise community and workplace settings for adult learning;
  - support for a European network of local and regional adult learning providers and animators/advisers;
  - widening the access to higher education awards by facilitating "one level higher" qualifications with innovative measures to facilitate continued learner participation in full or part time learning;
44. regrets that although the European Commission calls for ensuring adequate levels of investment in, and better monitoring of, the adult learning sector, both the public and private sectors currently provide inadequate funding in the field;
45. calls for a higher level of funding to existing and future programmes in order to maintain their potential impact in the adult learning sector;

## ACTION PLAN

*Analyse the effects of reforms in all sectors of education and training in member states on adult learning*

46. notes the close relationship of adult learning to other (well developed) sectors of the educational process and to the fact that engaging in a formal/informal adult learning event is never a *tabula rasa* event in citizens' lives but part of a self-improvement process which has added-value for society;
47. welcomes the development of National Qualification Frameworks (NQF) and mainstreaming of the adult learning sector and believes that focussed analysis of such trends in the Action Plan will bring coherence and added status to adult learning in Europe;

*Improve the quality of the adult learning sector*

48. accepts the importance of the professionalisation of adult learning personnel, including the provision of on-going training specific to adult education. These personnel are the "front line" contact and learning point for many adult learners. The quality of their learning, services and learning methodologies is vital in the effective translation of the European policy *rhetoric* of increased and deepened participation in adult learning into the *reality* of growth in this area;
49. believes that teaching staff's knowledge of the workplace should be ensured through interaction and flexible cooperation with the world of work;
50. looks forward with interest to the identification of European good practice in the forthcoming study *Adult learning professions in Europe* which will serve as a coherent basis for "professional" development. The inclusive nature of the list of stakeholders and adult learning contributors is welcomed;

*Increase the possibility for adults to go one step up and achieve at least one higher level qualification*

51. believes that this "one step up" measure could have a very positive effect on adult's motivation and learners' continued participation in a life long process. It addresses, *inter alia* changing demographic patterns in Europe, actively listening to "the voice of the learners themselves" and quality adult learning information, guidance services and resources. An important element for many adult learners is the personal feeling of self-affirmation and positive wellness associated with "success" in learning (formal/informal);
52. believes that the Action Plan could make a positive contribution to the production of good practice projects for reaching target groups, and attach greater value to the results from

projects such as Grundtvig, and proposes better use of the media in promoting the availability and suitability of adult educational programmes, especially amongst the hard-to-reach groups;

*Speed up the process of assessing and recognising non-formal and informal learning for disadvantaged groups*

53. underlines that the broadening of adult learners *per se* in an inclusive and developmental way recognises and endorses the diverse range of abilities, "intelligences," skills, socio-personal competences, experiences etc. of all European citizens. These are the rich contributions that adult learners bring to the learning table. It is important to organise lifelong learning opportunities in such a way as to ensure that wherever possible new knowledge, skills and attitudes can be related by learners to their immediate surroundings and matched to individual needs;
54. welcomes the Action Plan proposals such as the identification of good practice in recognition and validation of non formal/informal learning, emphasises on peer learning, and co-production of generic learning materials, as this recognition and legitimisation will be of positive motivational value to the sector, most especially the adult learner her/him self; validation must therefore be carried out at local and regional level, with the involvement of the various employment sectors in both the identification of needs and validation;
55. recognises that the inclusive recognition of previous "learnings" should be of particular value in broadening and deepening the participation of *older European persons*. Research data show that older people are not a visible cohort in European learning systems and demographic trends clearly indicate the urgency of treating this group in a targeted and focussed way;
56. believes that non/low engagement by this cohort has major implications for the group itself, as well as health, socio-civic, economic, cultural, inter- generational, and European cohesion considerations. Good principles and practice in *Educational Gerontology* must seek to build effective adult learning partnerships with this group, recognise and validate their learning needs, aspirations, achievements, experiences, motivations, learning styles, expectations, etc. and challenge the myths and stereotypes regarding older adult learning;
57. calls for the co-delivery of appropriately funded and quality learning opportunities to take due cognisance of cognitive, physical, motivational, dispositional, and attitudes to learning, etc. of this increasingly important adult learning group in Europe;
58. is in favour of giving more people a chance to benefit from the *use and influence of Information Communications Technology (ICT)* in the field of adult learning;
59. highlights that there is a significant body of evidence that the rapid expansion of e-learning in Europe may risk generating a new form of social inequality, i.e. digital exclusion. Research data suggest that people with access to the Internet and its sustained (learning) usage, while

generally increasing in European society, are still relatively low among the various at-risk groups;

60. advises that inequities in access to ICT reinforce, rather than ameliorate, existing barriers to participation in adult learning. The term "digital divide" indicates sharp disparities and substantial imbalance in generational, geographical, socio-economic, gender, unequal access to, and use of, ICT. "Blended methods", the quality of e-learning experiences, barriers to participation in e-learning, etc. are all important aspects of efficient and effective adult learning in Europe. The real concern is to take advantage of the opportunities provided by new technologies and use local and regional learning facilities to ensure that more people can benefit from them;

*Improve the monitoring of the adult learning sector*

61. accepts that the failure to demonstrate the benefits of adult learning is a significant weakness in this area and has major personal, social, economic, policy, resourcing, and structural implications;
62. considers that it is not a "black box" process of quantitative input-output data and findings but rather a research-led qualitative and "communications" engagement which could elevate the status and value of adult learning *per se* in personal, local, regional, and national "mind sets" and activities. The quest for shared understandings, "first principles", etc. will assist in this area and the actions set out in the communication in this regard are welcomed.

Brussels, 19 June 2008.

The President  
of the Committee of the Regions

Luc Van den Brande

The Secretary-General  
of the Committee of the Regions

Gerhard Stahl

## II. PROCEDURE

<b>Title</b>	Opinion on the Communication on the Action Plan on Adult Learning: It is always a good time to learn
<b>Reference(s)</b>	COM(2007) 558 final
<b>Legal basis</b>	Article 265 (1) TEC
<b>Procedural basis</b>	Optional referral
<b>Date of Commission letter</b>	27 September 2007
<b>Date of President's decision</b>	27 November 2007
<b>Commission responsible</b>	Commission for Education, Culture and Research (EDUC)
<b>Rapporteur</b>	Mary Shields (IE/UEN-EA) Member of Cork City Council
<b>Analysis</b>	18 January 2008
<b>Discussed in commission</b>	28 February 2008
<b>Date adopted by commission</b>	28 February 2008
<b>Result of the vote in commission</b>	Adopted by majority vote
<b>Date adopted in plenary</b>	19 June 2008
<b>Previous Committee opinions</b>	<p>Opinion on the Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning CdR 31/2006 fin<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Opinion on Efficiency and Equity in European education and training systems and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning CdR 335/2006 fin<sup>3</sup></p> <p>Opinion on the Communication from the Commission on Investing efficiently in education and training: an imperative for Europe (CdR 86/2003 fin)<sup>4</sup></p> <p>Opinion on the Communication from the Commission on Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006 CdR 248/2003 fin<sup>5</sup></p>

<sup>2</sup> OJ C 229, 22.9.2006, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> OJ C 146, 30.6.2007, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> OJ C 73, 23.3.2004, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> OJ C 73, 23.3.2004, p. 33.

	<p>Opinion on the role of universities in local and regional development within the context of a Europe of knowledge CdR 89/2003 fin<sup>6</sup></p> <p>Adoption of a multi-annual programme (2004-2006) for the effective integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education and training systems in Europe (eLearning Programme) CdR 73/2003 fin<sup>7</sup></p> <p>Opinion on the Communication from the Commission – Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality CdR 49/2002 fin<sup>8</sup></p> <p>Opinion on the Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning (CdR 31/2006 fin)<sup>9</sup></p> <p>Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism CdR 33/2006 fin<sup>10</sup></p>
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<sup>6</sup> OJ C 73, 23.3.2004, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> OJ C 244, 10.10.2003, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> OJ C 278, 14.11.2002, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> OJ C 229, 22.9.2006, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> OJ C 229, 22.9.2006, p. 34.