

Questions on adult education in Europe

Could you briefly describe the present structure of adult education in Europe as well as its relationship with lifelong learning?

Throughout Europe the concept of lifelong learning is operating as a *vision, a conceptual framework* for policy-making in relation to education and training and a *guiding principle* for provision and participation across all learning contexts. Within the framework of lifelong learning many countries are striving to increase the quantity and quality of adult learning and to ensure compatibility and complementarity between initiatives. Adoption of a *lifelong learning approach* has important implications for structures, the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, the entitlements of individuals, the provision of learning opportunities, the overall quality of provision and the recognition of learning.

In the majority of countries adult education is the least regulated section of the overall education system. *Multiple partners* have a stake in adult education policy-making and implementation, including ministries, regional governments, local governments, social partners, public providers, non-governmental organisations and private for-profit providers, all frequently operating from different values, objectives and approaches. Depending on the point-of-view, this diversity constitutes a 'rich mosaic or a 'confusing mélange'. Clearly, maximisation of investment by all stakeholders will depend on co-ordination and coherence in policy-making and implementation.

Public policy has to create the frameworks needed to motivate adults to engage in learning and, in addition, has to be made in the context of a wide range of other policies, including health, training, welfare. The social partners and civil society are being increasingly recognised as collaborators in this process and their involvement ranges from consultation to participation in formal structures at national and/or regional levels. *Co-ordination* at national and/or regional ministry level and *decentralisation* are the two main administrative approaches adopted to achieve overall co-ordination and coherence.

To address potential fragmentation and duplication and to move towards an overarching lifelong learning framework, many countries have established co-operative partnership models of working through a range of *concrete inter-ministerial structures* and mechanisms to promote co-ordination so as to maximise investment in adult learning. The creation of

a national/regional co-ordinating body for adult learning with policy-making and implementation, policy co-ordination and/or policy advisory roles is in evidence in a number of countries. Such bodies bring together adult learning stakeholders, including government ministries, social partners, representative of statutory providers, learners and non-governmental interests in adult learning, especially non-formal adult education, with a view to increasing participation in and raising the quality of, adult learning.

There is a growing emphasis on *the principle of subsidiarity* whereby authority for decision-making is located as close as possible to where education and training actions are taken. Administrative structures to support *decentralisation* of policy-making and implementation to sub-national levels of authority is generally considered a key strategy in enabling co-ordinated and coherent provision for adult learning. Decentralisation is seen as increasing efficiency and effectiveness through devolution of decision-making to where the policies will be implemented and through affording funders, organisers and providers greater autonomy to co-operate in identifying and meeting local needs.

However, apart from the national representative associations formed by countries non-formal adult education providers in many countries, the growing co-ordination and coherence agenda does not necessarily extend to non-formal adult education.

At European level, has adult education policy a global approach to the formal, non-formal & informal aspects of this type of education, or does it focus only on the formal?

In the European Commission's Communication *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality* (2001) lifelong learning is defined as "all learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective". Within this framework all the dimensions of adult education - as economic policy, as social policy, as social movement and as individual and collective endeavour - get equal billing. Further, lifelong learning is characterised as taking place in formal, non-formal and informal settings and as having a key role to play in economic development, active citizenship and social inclusion.

The European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning published in late 2005 set out eight competences across the entire spectrum for personal, social, cultural and working life.

Since 2000 the Grundtvig Action of the Socrates Programme aimed at enhancing the European dimension, innovation and quality of adult education has supported hundreds of actions throughout Europe in the field of general and civic adult education, including co-operation projects, learning partnerships, training courses, Europe-wide networks and dissemination events which have brought together thousands of adult educators from the formal and non-formal learning domains. The new *Integrated Programme in Lifelong Learning (2007-2013)* provides for a stand-alone Grundtvig programme for adult education, a development which had strong support from key personnel within the European Commission. The *Citizenship in Action* programme which will also run from 2007 will enable civil society faith-based, youth and cultural organisations, trade unions and family associations to organise activities for the development of active and participatory citizenship and interculturalism.

In addition to the work of the EU Directorate-General for Education and Culture, formal, non-formal and informal adult education and training – and lifelong learning as a structuring policy strategy – are a key dimension of a broad variety of policies promulgated at EU level, including employment; information society; research and development (R&D); environment; consumer affairs and social policy.

In the context of the different settings for adult learning, it is interesting to note that Eurostat data from the Labour Force Survey *ad hoc* module on lifelong learning carried out in 2003 show that nearly one European out of three declared having done some form of informal learning in the previous 12-month period. Moreover, in the 2003 Eurobarometer survey module on lifelong learning, respondents considered they learned more often in non-formal and informal settings than in formal education and training settings. However, very little research on informal learning exists at either European or national levels, pointing to a clear need for investigation of the role and value of informal learning in adult's lives.

How have the single countries reacted to the European orientations on adult education? Does a monitoring system exist at European level?

The European Union provides direction for national orientations within a framework which fully respects the responsibility and autonomy of Member States to develop their own education and training systems. Within this context, all countries provide evidence of the impact of the Lisbon Agenda on their policy priorities and in 2006 the agenda is specifically named as a policy compass by a number of countries (for example, Bulgaria; Czech Republic; Greece; Latvia; Malta; Poland; Spain). It is clear that the flagship

Education & Training 2010 work programme is driving developments in all countries. Many countries have now developed lifelong learning policy statements, strategy documents or national action plans. Others have put framework legislation in place (for example, France, Greece, Spain and Romania). But the emerging lifelong learning policies show differences in, for example, the emphasis placed on the social dimension of policy, a situation characterised by an emphasis on a knowledge economy rather than a knowledge society. The latter includes the former but encompasses broader social, cultural and political goals for individuals and societies. Some countries (for example, Denmark; Finland; Norway; Sweden) are striking a positive balance between the two approaches and are making strong advances on implementation.

In 2003 the Education Council, in the context of the objectives of education and training systems, adopted five benchmarks or 'reference levels of European average performance' for the improvement of education and training systems in the Member States. The following benchmarks are of particular interest to adult learning stakeholders: a. by 2010 at least 85% of 22-year olds in the EU should have completed upper secondary education; b. by 2010 EU average participation in lifelong learning by the 25-64 age group should be at least 12.5%.

The *Education & Training 2010* work programme proposed the 'open method of co-ordination' to foster and measure progress and based on voluntary approaches such as co-operation in quality assurance; peer review and a particular focus on the exchange of models and methods between countries. The progress of Member States against benchmarks is measured on a systematic basis. The fact that, since 2004, the Commission produces/will produce a report every two years on progress in the implementation of *Education and Training 2010* is seen as part of the monitoring process.

Taking into consideration the high differentiation of adult education pathways within Europe, how is certification faced up at European level in order to facilitate the mobility?

Supra-national and national objectives of building a lifelong learning society are creating a strong demand for more coherent and flexible qualifications systems and governments in many countries are responding with legislation, the establishment of national /regional awarding bodies with overall responsibility for the qualifications system and the development of overall qualifications frameworks.

Allied to the development of national qualification systems, there is a growing movement throughout Europe for recognition, accreditation and certification of learning outcomes independent of when, where or how they have been achieved. In general, the recognition of prior learning (RPL) agenda is being driven by the vocational education and training sector as a means of raising skills levels for individuals, enterprises and society. So far the impact of RPL on general adult education has been limited as entry, especially to non-formal adult education, is relatively flexible and informal recognition of prior learning tends to be embedded in the planning of learning programmes.

The development of national qualifications systems is taking place within a European context. Responding to the call in the Copenhagen Declaration decision was adopted in December 2004 on a single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences. The decision established a new transparency tool, Europass, which integrates qualifications and competences across all lifelong learning in an ICT-based portfolio. In mid-2005 the Commission consultation on a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was launched. The objective of the proposed EQF is to create a European framework to enable qualification systems at the national and sectoral levels to relate to each other. The consultation with stakeholders in the 32 countries participating in the *Education & Training 2010* work programme ended in December 2005. The feedback will be taken into account in establishing the final content and structures of the EQF.

Considering the difficulty to find common pathways and certification models, which instruments could be or have been used to assure quality of adult education? Could you recommend us any best practices on this aspect?

The Barcelona European Council (2002) set the goal that education & training systems in the European Union would be 'a world quality reference' by 2010. In the context of lifelong learning, quality may be said to refer to the 'best possible outcomes' for all the stakeholders. The learner expects the best return on the investment of time, effort and money in the shape of the key competences for lifelong learning and qualifications. Other stakeholders expect economic, social and cultural outcomes.

Enhancing the effectiveness of education and training through improving quality standards is a major theme of reform for most countries. However, in general, countries have not developed adequate national performance indicators or put in place arrangements to collect necessary data, with the result that it is difficult for them to measure the overall impact of education

and training actions. Where formal adult education is delivered in mainstream schools the quality assurance measures in place – or not, as the case may be - in those institutions apply equally to the adult provision. Procedures for quality assurance in non-formal adult education vary enormously and there is evidence that in many countries, accountability and quality issues are coming to the fore for bodies in receipt of public financing.

For the adult learner him/herself many elements are essential to ensure a quality learning experience including: a. information & guidance; b. learning and other needs analysis; c. financial support; d. relevant/useful learning content for a wide range of purposes; e. flexible teaching and learning organisation & methodologies; f. learning supports as appropriate; g. assessment processes and recognition of learning outcomes through a qualification that has the currency for progression; h. opportunities to be involved in evaluation as part of quality assurance; i. staff development which includes equality & diversity awareness training for managers and teachers; j. external quality control.

To ensure and support the above learner-focused quality dimensions, the state has a range of measures at its disposal including: a. policies to develop overall goals and strategies for adult education; b. inter-ministerial & other stakeholder co-ordination for synergy & coherence; c. regional/national bodies with overall responsibility for quality; d. indicators and benchmarks to set targets & measure progress; e. appropriate standards developed with the support of key stakeholders; f. external quality control measures to monitor and evaluate inputs & outcomes and to ensure provider quality assurance systems are in place; g. measures to ensure initial/continuing professional development of adult education personnel; h. national/regional management information systems to provide good and timely information about the outcomes of adult learning; i. protections for learners.