



LEAP

Local Adult Education Policy

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Intellectual Output 2

Trends & Dynamics in AE Local Policy Making

EUROPEAN Snapshot

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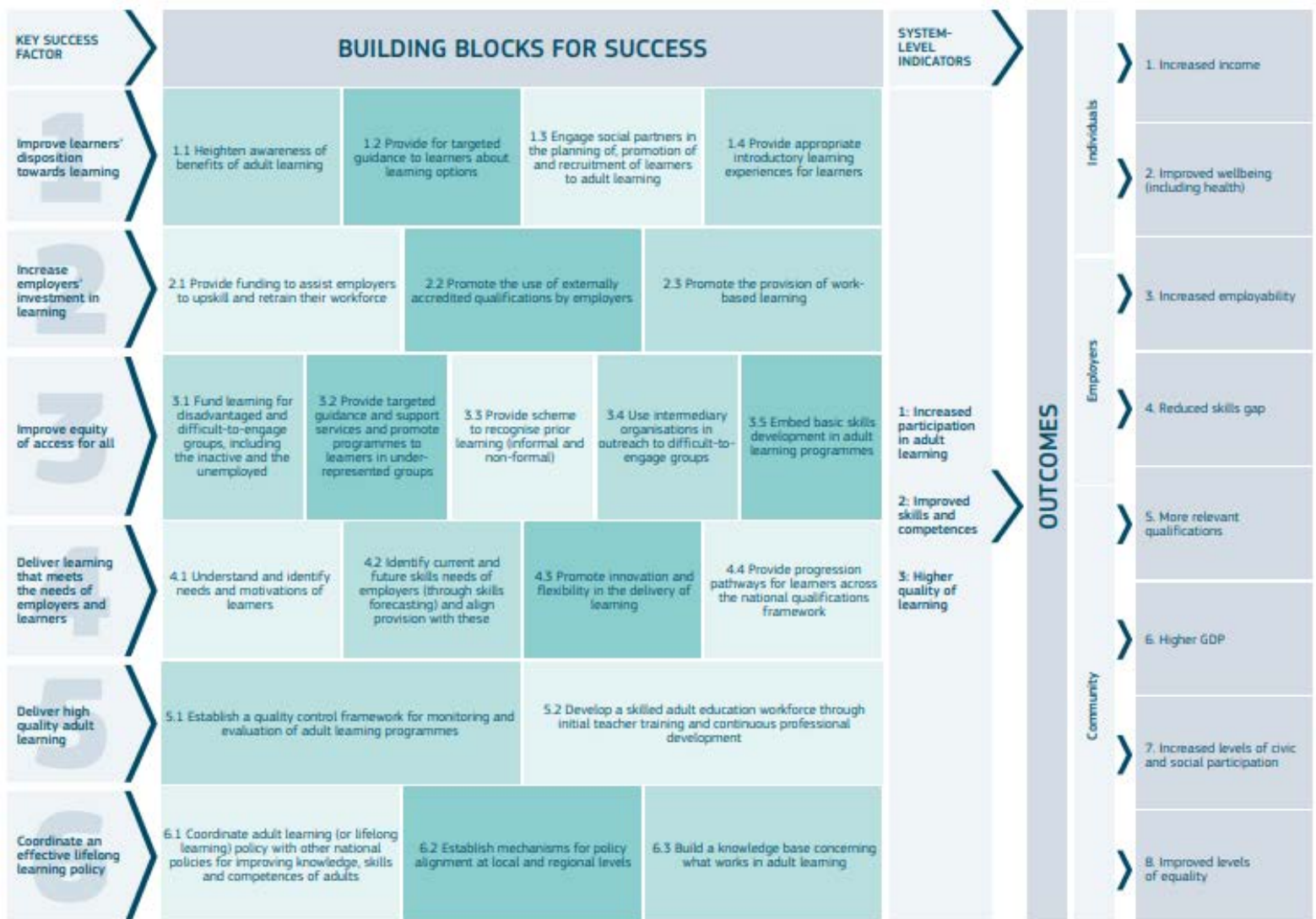
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Introduction

In the context of this report, we provide for few several insights so as to allow readers in get a better sense on what is the current status of AE and adult learning systems in Europe.

The picture emerging from our analysis is of a system that is: stagnant in numbers¹, highly fragmented and self-referential to local contexts. On one hand, key policy recommendations from the EU for AE and adult learning give great flexibility to stakeholders established at local level; on the other, stakeholders struggle in embedding these same recommendations (Exhibit 1) in their policy framework – limiting their interventions to assuring findings availability, budget control and audit.

Exhibit 1: The Building Blocks for Adult Learning policies



¹ Eurostat, Adult Learning Statistics, last available data: May 2020

Source: Towards more effective adult learning policies: helping adults develop the knowledge and skills they need, EU Commission

The actual deployment of AE programmes relies on semi- or fully independent organisation and third parties deciding themselves for the structure, overall outline and content of the training. This happens on the basis of internal needs-analysis and assessments carried out internally.

When translated from policy to practice (i.e. from the EU ecosystem to local and regional level), the integrity and operative coherence of the framework is jeopardized by a dispersion and fragmentation of shares of responsibilities, common understandings and groups of interest.

Per se, the fact that local AE policies are finetuned based on the specific sectorial and territorial ecosystem, is something expected and desired by the EU institutions. The issue is that, at local level, the whole process is generally implemented with no coherent alignment to the aforementioned framework, making reference instead to internal policy processes. Interestingly, positive outcomes are achieved regardless: this poses some genuine reflections on the untapped potential that could be effectively exploited (achieved) if only local public administration start to integrate and coordinate their actions based on EU's guidelines.

How AE policies are defined in Europe? THE DESIGN PROCESS

In the following paragraphs, we highlight in brief what is the policy making process implemented by EU institutions.

Ordinary Legislative Procedure

In principle, (new) EU policies are designed and developed based on the identification, and assessment, of new emerging contextual factors (i.e. socio-economic dynamics) for which new policy development might be needed. In Table 1, readers can find a detailed overview of the different EU legislations in which the new proposal frames as a policy.

Table 1: European Union Policies
DIRECTIVE: a legislative decision requiring all Member States to pursuit and achieve an objective as outlined by the Directive itself. Member States maintain some degree on flexibility in defining national plans and strategies to comply with the Directive
REGULATION: a legislative decision which must find same application among all Members States
DECISION: a legislative decision targeted only to specific subjects (detailed by the Decision)
RECOMMENDATIONS: non-mandatory guidelines and inputs on specific domains and topics, provided also by Member States for other Member States
OPINION: non-mandatory call for actions issued by one of the three institutions, Committee of the Regions, European & Social Affairs Committee

Typically, the main drivers of new policy cycles are represented by radical and disruptive phenomenon in all domain of societies and economy (social inequalities, e.g. migration, gender inequalities; IT development, e.g. AI, machine learning), so much so to challenge the reliability of consolidated policy models.

Such “monitoring” activity is under the responsibility of the European Commission as the institution in charge of identifying where “fresh” interventions may be needed and in regards to which challenges and opportunities.

Based on the above, the EU Commission structure a proposed policy detailing the underlying need (or untapped opportunity) and alternative solutions to address it efficiently and effectively. The proposal stems from many different contributors as representatives of civil society, stakeholders and professional with robust and reliable expertise in the considered field.

The proposal is strengthened by the consolidation of an Impact Assessment, quantifying and qualifying the identified issues, their economic, social, and environmental impacts, possible lines of intervention².

After that, the EU Commission submit the proposal to the European Parliament and the Council of European Union. Both institutions will evaluate the proposal through their members competent on the matter³:

- In the case of the European Parliament;

A task group (i.e. Committee) of Members of the European Parliament (henceforth, MEPs) evaluate and assess the proposal which is also responsible for the bilateral debate with representatives from the Council. The MEPs Committee draft a first reports in which details recommendations and feedbacks that should be of relevance for the assessment process carried out by the Council. Other MEPs are not excluded from the debate as the report will be publicly discussed by the Parliament so as to consolidate and overall common position.

- In the case of the Council of European Union;

The proposal is scrutinized by a working group and submitted to official representatives of national ministries⁴. In parallel to the Parliament's discussion, the Council agrees on a general position towards the EU Commission's proposal

What follows after is a debate phase in which Council and Parliament discuss their view on the proposal. Upon any new suggested revision, the Parliament proceed with additional readings as long as a final agreement is not achieved. The progress can be relatively time-consuming, even more if trilateral meetings are foreseen between representatives of the three major institutions (Commission, Parliament, Council). Trilateral discussion are established so as to nurture common agreement from all parties.

From there the proposal passes on the hands of a "Conciliation work group" which finalise the definitive text of the aforementioned. The proposal will translate in policy when both institutions agree on the finale text as elaborated by the work group and after subscription by Presidents and Secretary-Generals of both institutions.

The full text of the policy is available to the public through the Official Journal of the European Union (web portal: [EUR-Lex](#)).

The definition of AE and LLL policies follows the same path as above.

² Although representing the general rule, the Impact Assessment is not mandatory when, for instance, the proposal stems from an existing policy

³ The so defined "First Reading"

⁴ The level of involvement of National Ministries is really an issue on how the proposal might have disproportionate impacts on Members States

How AE policies are implemented at EU dimension? THE DEPLOYMENT PHASE

In the following paragraphs, we list a series of EU policies in the field of Adult Education and, more in general, pertaining to the overall diagram of education and training.

Adult learning is recognised of pivotal priority for the economic and social development of Member States. Numerous actions and initiatives have been implemented at EU dimensions to foster the upskilling and capacity building opportunities of adults.

Increasing digital divides and social inequalities within and between EU societies triggered the consideration of a renewed set of skills for adult learners to better (re)integrate their citizen status in current changing economies.

One of the most important pieces of legislation is the **Resolution** adopted by the Council on a **renewed agenda for adult learning**⁵. The resolution calls for:

1. Enhancing the access opportunity for adults in education and training, both in formal and non-formal settings
2. Developing new training models that learners-centred, flexible and empowering of learners' self-awareness and self-efficacy
3. Nurturing and valorising public awareness on the subject as a concrete response to unemployment, underemployment, socio-economic marginalisation
4. Strengthening at national at international level the formal and non-formal support system of socio-economic operators involved in domains of public relevance
5. Ensuring the provision of highly qualifying skills and competences and supported/promoted by civil society, third sector and public stakeholders
6. Promoting work- and experienced training models
7. Encouraging cooperative models between adult education institutions and other formal institutions operating in different educational settings (i.e. HE)
8. Empowering the role of social partners and private organization as key agents of innovation and development for new sustainable AE frameworks
9. Providing senior citizens concrete opportunities for active ageing, prevention of health disease, proactive engagement in culture and societies
10. Leveraging on AE as a concrete means to foster solidarity and inclusion

The resolution clearly stems from the roots of **Europe 2020**⁶, a major strategy established at the beginning of the last decade for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Europe 2020 included seven flagship initiatives to boost socio-economic and technological progresses in seven other respective areas.

⁵ Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (2011/C 372/01). Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011G1220\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011G1220(01)&from=EN)

⁶ Communication from the Commission Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLETE%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%20007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf>

AE falls under “An agenda for new skills and jobs”⁷ in which Member States are recommended to “ensure that the competences required to engage in further learning and the labour market are acquired and recognised throughout general, vocational, higher and adult education, including non-formal and informal learning” (pp. 17).

The aforementioned Council resolution recalls specifically also the following other two flagships, in order:

- “European Platform Against Poverty”⁸, recalling the social role of AE as antidote against socio-economic marginalization and catalyst of employment opportunities
- “Innovation Union”⁹, so as to readapt business models, products and services tailored to an ageing society

Throughout the last decade, the Council resolution has been complemented by several other major initiatives, namely:

➤ **Council Recommendation on upskilling pathways**¹⁰

In December 2016, the Council published 25 key recommendations (8 of which addressed at the EU Commission) highlighting new key intervention areas to sustain the competitiveness and attractiveness of national AE systems.

These inputs are clustered based on the specific strategic dimensions they belong to:

1. Skills assessment: literacy, numeracy and digital skills
2. Three-phase methodology: assessment > tailoring > validation
3. Coordination, partnerships and Stakeholder Management
4. Outreach of targets, guidance and orienteering, establishment of supporting networks
5. Follow up and evaluation

Overall, these recommendations are aimed to strengthen highly-qualifying training and education provision at national and local levels by encouraging long-standing, trust-based and flexible cooperating models between formal and non-formal operators, civil society representatives, local stakeholders and third sector.

Member states are encouraged in being sensitive to national-related circumstances and ecosystems. This means that the above recommendations may find different strategies and plans of deployments – based on specific target groups, skill-gaps and needs assessment. In this regard, the Commission role is to:

1. facilitate the emergence of a transnational collaboration networks – formal and non-formal – among practitioners and policy stakeholders

⁷ Flagship no. 6

⁸ Flagship no. 7

⁹ Flagship no. 8

¹⁰ COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults (2016/C 484/01), Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016H1224(01)&from=EN)

2. elaborate new policy proposal that are informed by inputs and assessments from large international institutions (i.e. UNESCO, OECD, etc) so as to tackle also international trends that are of relevance for the European Union
3. mainstream and promote the availability of EU Funds as a supporting mechanism for flexible, innovative and highly impactful AE programmes at local level
4. in cooperation with Members States representatives, stock-take and report to the Council results and impacts achieved

Concerning point no. 4, the first comprehensive transnational report¹¹ has been published by the EU Commission in 2019. Data support the conclusion that the overall phenomenon of AE and adult learning is highly fragmented. This is also due to the fact that, based on the aforementioned tailoring principle, results may not be (and should not) be heterogeneous as highly dependent on specific national contextual factors. At the same time, the EU Commission identified some common traits that pose as challenges and threats to an effective rollout of the recommendation and matching with the expected outcomes:

- In the vast majority of cases, the three basic skills are not directly addressed. On the other hand, greater focus is given to VET and work related-skills for employment and (re)integration in the labour market – which per se is not a negative result, but it is just indicative of the mismatch between policy and practice level
- The three-steps approach lacks in implementation. A large number of training programmes relies on generic curricula out of the focus of Council's recommendation. This questions the idea if tailoring guideline is actually putted in practice.
- AE initiatives are not appealing: data suggest that potential targets of adult learning programmes lack of motivation/interest in getting engaged. This might be really an issue of how AE initiatives are marketed and promoted at national and local level, how AE operators target their cohort of reference, design, structure and implement communication plans
- Numerous founded programmes launched and supported by the EU Commission are specifically dedicated to address the challenges tackled by the upskilling pathway's Recommendations, namely:
 - [EaSI](#)
 - [European Social Fund \(ESF\)](#)
 - [Erasmus+](#)
 - [European Regional Development Fund \(ERDF\)](#)
 - [Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived \(FEAD\)](#)
 - [European Globalisation Adjustment Fund \(EGF\)](#)
 - [European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development \(EAFRD\)](#)

Evidences from the analysis suggest that grass-root AE programmes are too dependent on the cycle of EU funding opportunities. This is a symptom of the fact that initiatives of

¹¹ COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT, Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults - Taking stock of implementation measures, 2019. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/file_import/implementation-report-upskilling-pathways_en.pdf

such kind are not able yet to trigger a self-sufficient cycle and to nurture long-term plans for sustainability and valorisation.

What followed is a recent Council Conclusion¹² taking-stock of EU Commission's input and detailing ten other strategic areas in which the Council commits to focus energies and resources.

➤ **ET 2020 Working Group**

The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) provide to Member States new opportunities to exchange best practices in the field of education and training, advance the policy dialogue in innovative reforms, mainstream case studies of international relevance.

The framework is not AE-centered – as being much more oriented toward a LLL approach – but it represents one the most important lighthouse for AE policies and programmes. Two of its four pillars are in fact devoted to core pillars of AE policies and reforms:

- Improve the quality and efficiency of education and training
- Promote equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship

A part of this policy cooperation process foresees the establishment of “working groups” composed by international experts in the relative field and officially appointed by EU Member States to support governments and EU institutions in designing new best practices, strategies, objectives and models. Each strategic area has its own working group.

The Working Group on Adult Learning supports EU/national legislators in discussing and cross-assessing innovative ideas for policy reform and practice in AE. Its latest publication¹³ addresses specifically the “marketing” dimension of AE so as to:

- Empower the communication strategies of AE-related initiatives by relevant operators – both public and private
- Strengthen the public perception of AE as opportunity for employment, inclusion and equal opportunities
- Retain greater number of learners and trigger a self-sustained cycle of training and education provision

➤ **European Skills Agenda¹⁴**

The new European Skills Agenda is a five-years plan to sustain businesses and citizens in transiting into the new post-covid societies and economies.

¹² Council conclusions on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults (2019/C 189/04), 2019. Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019XG0605\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019XG0605(01)&from=EN)

¹³ Promoting adult learning in the workplace. Final report of the ET 2020 Working Group 2016 – 2018 on Adult Learning, 2018. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8112&furtherPubs=yes>

¹⁴ European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=22832&langId=en>

The plan stems from the ten original pillars of the 2016 Skills Agenda¹⁵ in which the aforementioned Upskilling pathways represented the very core of the legislative proposal.

The new agenda is subdivided in four main domain areas, each of which including specific “Action” to tackle further sub-priorities (Table 2).

Joining forces for a collective effort	Ensuring the right skills for jobs	Supporting people in LLL	Unlocking investments in skills
Action 1: A Pact for Skills	Action 2: Strengthening skills intelligence Action 3: EU support for strategic national upskilling action Action 4: Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) Action 5: Rolling out the European Universities Initiative and upskilling scientists Action 6: Skills to support the twin transitions Action 7: Increasing STEM graduates and fostering entrepreneurial and transversal skills Action 8: Skills for life	Action 9: Initiative on individual learning accounts Action 10: A European approach to micro-credentials Action 11: New Europass platform	Action 12: Improving the enabling framework to unlock Member States’ and private investments in skills

Specific targets are agreed for AE, adult learning and low-skilled adults by 2025 (Table 3):

Participation of adults aged 25-64 in learning during the last 12 months (in %)	+50%
Participation of low-qualified adults 25-64 in learning during the last 12 months (in %)	+30%
Share of unemployed adults aged 25-64 with a recent learning experience (in %)	+20%
Share of adults aged 16-74 having at least basic digital skills (in %)	+70%

¹⁵ A NEW SKILLS AGENDA FOR EUROPE. Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness (SWD(2016) 195 final). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0381&from=EN>

From where we might gather relevant case studies?

Notable to mention it is also the contribution of the three official EU frameworks for education and training developed and published by the Joint Research Center of the EU Commission.

As products themselves of the 2016 Skills Agenda and the Council's Upskilling Paths, the **EntreComp**¹⁶, **DigComp**¹⁷ and **LifeComp**¹⁸ frameworks provide all for robust models on which citizens can rely on for their own sense of self-empowerment and capacity-building.

Trainers, coaches and educators – both in formal and non-formal settings – are recommended to embed the models into their ordinary curricula development activities. Frameworks are designed to be as flexible and adaptable as possible in consideration of the specific given target and in consideration of the many different demographics to which LLL initiatives are addressed to.

Official follow-up to the original publications¹⁹ offer a very comprehensive sample of case studies in which the aforementioned proved to be effective triggers of national/international-scale education and training programmes. What really stands out is the grass-root and bottom-up nature of these initiatives: designed, promoted, led and implemented by independent organisation – from private, public and mostly third sector – and typically (but not exclusively) founded thanks the Erasmus + Programme.

Interesting to notice is also the distribution of AE-related initiatives that stems between the two frameworks²⁰. The dataset available for EntreComp initiatives indicates us that the sample of initiatives targeted at adult learners is way more narrowed than the number of training programmes activated for school, Youth (with particular reference to NEETs) and VET. On the other hand, adult learners represent the cohort of preference for DigComp-related training programmes. The reasons might lie on the fact that digital skill-lags among senior and adults in definitely more pronounced than any other demography. As such, training programmes tailored on digital empowerment are perceived with more urgency and relevancy than entrepreneurial learning.

Finally, another fundamental resource for the scouting of such references is also represented by the EPALE portal, the official electronic platform for adult education learning in Europe. EPALE works as an open online community whose content is generated by users for users to

¹⁶ “EntreComp is the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework for people interested in learning, teaching and fostering the knowledge, skills and attitudes that make up an entrepreneurial mindset”, source: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=it&pubId=8201&furtherPubs=yes>

¹⁷ “The European Digital Competence Framework, also known as DigComp, offers a tool to improve citizen's digital competence. Today, being digitally competent means that people need to have competences in all areas of DigComp”, source: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcomp>

¹⁸ “The LifeComp framework regards “Personal, Social and Learning to Learn” as a set of competences applying to all spheres of life that can be acquired through formal informal and non-formal education, and can help citizens to thrive in the 21st Century”, source: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC120911>

¹⁹ EntreComp into Action - Get inspired, make it happen: A user guide to the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework, 2018. Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC109128>; DigComp into Action: Get inspired, make it happen. A user guide to the European Digital Competence Framework, 2018. Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC110624>

²⁰ No available data for LifeComp due to its recent publication. If the JRC's plans for LifeComp are the same as EntreComp and DigComp, we might expect a “LifeComp into Action” report near 2022.

capitalise on others' previous experiences, draft ideas and inspirations, exchange best practices, sustain transnational cooperative models.

Conclusion and Takeaways

Overall, available literature sources stress the fact that the efficiency and effectiveness of adult learning initiatives implemented at local and territorial level can be attributed to synergies and dynamics emerging from the coordination of multiple socio-economic agents operating in the system. For the most, policy interventions are aimed to sustain the availability of funding and investments from which formal and non-formal AE providers draw monetary funds to tackle and addresses challenges and need-assessment as observed from their ecosystem.

The fact that policy stakeholders tempt to limit their areas of intervention on auditing and budget control, leaves AE providers relatively free to decide themselves what are the most relevant areas of interest for their operative action. In turn, this produces a “drift effect” of the priorities addressed for adult learning at local level from the ones strategically designed by EU institutions.

Council, Parliament and Commission openly incentivise a flexibility principle that allows for strategies and interventions to be better finetuned on the considered context. At the same time, this flexibility should be applied within the same policy frameworks of EU institutions.

Based on that, specific takeaways²¹ for local policy makers are as follows:

1. Increasing public awareness on AE opportunities
 - a. Benefits for economic inclusion
 - b. Benefits for social inclusion
2. Increasing investments (financial and not) in adult learning
 - a. Programmes for workforce development and skills-alliance to new thriving occupations
3. Increasing access opportunities/removing barriers to training and education
 - a. Strengthening the role and influence of local support networks both operating in formal and non-formal settings
 - b. Marketing and engagement plan of marginalised groups
4. Increasing time- and social relevancy of the training programme offer
 - a. Tackling labour market needs/opportunities
 - b. Tackling employer’s needs
 - c. Tackling personal aspirations
5. Increasing the quality of the training and education offer
 - a. Strengthening the validation and recognition of learning outcomes
6. Increasing the cooperation-axis with other education and training settings
 - a. Engaging a wider range of social partners (i.e. Academics) in the definition and deployment of training programmes

²¹ An in-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe. European Commission, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2015. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/it/publication-detail/-/publication/c8c38dc9-89d0-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

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Please refer to the excel file