

# It's always a good time to learn



Final conference on the Adult Learning Action Plan

7- 8 - 9 March 2011 - Budapest, Hungary

"It is always a good time to learn"

Final conference on implementing the Action Plan on Adult Learning

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## Summary of outcomes

The Final conference on implementing the Action Plan on Adult Learning "It is always a good time to learn" held in Budapest on 7-9 March, brought together more than 250 adult learning stakeholders from over 35 countries, including partners from the United Nations, Council of Europe, OECD, Economic and Social Committee, civil society and the private sector, as well as social partners and representatives from public authorities. The conference was held in the country of the EU presidency and was organized in cooperation with the Hungarian Ministry of Employment.

The conference marked three years of intensive European cooperation in the field of adult learning policy with the aim to review the results achieved through implementation of the Adult Learning Action Plan, to identify the main challenges faced by adult learning to 2020 and to provide feedback from key stakeholders on future needs and actions.

These objectives were fully attained. The conference was preceded by pre-information sessions which set out the adult learning context in Hungary with examples of good practices. Alongside keynote speeches from Deputy Director-General Xavier Prats Monné, the Hungarian Minister of State for Employment Policy Mr Sándor Czomba, Prof. Maria João Rodrigues (Special Advisor to the European Commission), Prof. Gábor Halász, (University Eötvös Loránd, Hungary) and Mr Bernard Hugonnier, (Deputy Director General, OECD), intensive discussions in a plenary panel and seven working groups gave rise to a wealth of insights and ideas which will be invaluable in helping to shape the future action plan.

Participants unanimously acknowledged the success of the Action Plan (2008-2010) in promoting the adult learning agenda in various ways in all countries, though adult learning and how it is understood still differs hugely between countries. They gave evidence of the value of having a common reference with milestones as an instrument for debate with national ministers and authorities. The Working group report summarizing three years of intensive cooperation between Members States was presented during the conference, along with other studies (e.g. Eurydice, Cedefop). A culture of mutual learning for better policy making and practice has been initiated and must continue.

Conference participants were agreed that adult learning makes a vital contribution to addressing many of society's major challenges such as improving the level of knowledge, skills and competences across the population as an essential element in responding to the

economic crisis; coming to terms with demographic change including an ageing society and the increasing incidence of migration; political challenges including the promotion of active citizenship, intercultural awareness, environmental protection and sustainable development; and a whole range of challenges relating to social cohesion and solidarity.

Adult learning is about "making people make the most of their lives and jobs". Employability and social inclusion skills should go hand in hand. General and vocational learning are therefore complementary and should be available to adults in combinations, varying from person to person according to their previous CV, motivation and needs, etc. By developing the transversal key competences they can be applied to life and work, both of which continue to undergo dramatic change. Therefore, adult learning policy requires clear coherence with the schools, VET and higher education policies. Validation processes can be an important bridge between them.

Despite progress, reforms, innovations in many countries and regions, the hard fact remains that the population of adult non-learners is 50 million more than it was 10 years ago. Achieving key competences, including adequate literacy, numeracy and digital skills, is still a problem among a third of the workforce, many of whom will need to upgrade their skills to remain in employment. Non-participation in adult learning should be the issue of the decade, and developing adult learning a task for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the conference was told.

Challenges/obstacles facing adult learning in the years ahead relate to: low visibility; lack of integrated policy-making; under-funding, the need to maintain the full spectrum of adult learning including formal and non-formal learning and a balance between responding to economic and other challenges; low motivation and participation rates; limited language learning; lack of training and qualifications of staff; absence of the necessary flexible teaching methodologies; the need to promote validation within national qualification frameworks; low levels of adult guidance; a lack of data on adult learning (data desert).

To develop the strong and responsive adult learning sector, priority should be given among others to:

- Helping the low skilled and low educated acquire the key competences for life and work, starting with basic skills - adequate literacy, numeracy and digital skills;
- A sophisticated guidance service to ensure that adults make the right choices, find the right offers and design a lifelong project for themselves;
- Tailor-made responses to the individual learner's needs, supported by a range of pedagogies combined with ICTs, and supported by highly competent teachers to guide them in the knowledge society where everyone should make the best of their abilities;
- Learning centres/ learning communities and regions, with a strong link to social networks, which should give adult learning a more important place in the community, with robust partnerships across all relevant local actors supporting the central role of the public sector;
- Vital contribution of higher education institutions which have the dual role of opening up to adult students and providing research and analysis of the sector;
- Developing a greatly improved knowledge base on adult learning sector;
- Improving professional development in order to ensure and maintain the high quality of teaching staff in the adult learning sector;
- A vibrant new sector, "learning for a long life", and for active, autonomous, and healthy ageing, which cultivates inter-generational learning and solidarity between

ages, and using the social, cultural and identity capitals of older people, in addition to their human capital.

All this needs to be underpinned by incentives giving people the time and means to access learning for their personal and professional development, balanced with their other multiple life priorities. Knowing that budgets will not grow, we have to find effective and creative ways to use existing resources efficiently. Here the conference highlighted the need for inter-ministerial cooperation and coordination, in particular between ministries of education, employment, health and justice, while always looking to show the wider benefits of adult education, e.g. in terms of improved health and therefore savings on medical care, less crime and delinquency and related savings in policing and incarceration, etc. Also at EU level, there was a call for more internal coherence between the structural funds, ESF and the Community programmes, and the leverage between them and other funding sources, such as EIB.

Civil society has a key role, particularly in cultivating non-formal and informal learning, which are the mainstay of adult learning. Employers are also looking for better key competences, strong literacy and numeracy, communication and social skills, as new jobs will be found more and more in areas such as personal services, creativity, tourism and leisure, and SMEs will continue to characterise European enterprises. However, the workplace itself is also an untapped learning space that must be a partner in any solutions.

Technologies and new social networks help people re-connect with learning, with peers, experts and learning support. The role of the teacher in this is that of a guide orchestrating learning, leading adult learners to autonomy.

Regarding the future Action plan, a unanimous view emerged from the conference working groups and panels that the work which has been launched by the 2007 Action plan should continue, thereby helping to ensure that the value and benefits of adult learning for society are fully recognised. Upgrading the skills of the 76 million low qualified/low educated should be a central strategic objective, but equally learning how to understand and adapt to change and to live in harmony in a cohesive Europe characterised by its ageing and pluralist societies.

The Staff Working paper, which sums up the achievements as well as the areas which were not adequately developed under the Action Plan 2008 to 2010, will be discussed at an informal lunch during the meeting of EU Education Ministers in May (to be confirmed). The Commission will immediately start to prepare a new action plan to follow on from the Communication on Lifelong Learning it is preparing for summer 2011.