OUTREACH AND ACCESS IN ADULT LEARNING: ACCESS IN RURAL AREAS

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) is the voice of non-formal adult education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with more than 124 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide. EAEA promotes adult learning and access to and participation in non-formal adult education for all; particularly for groups that are currently underrepresented.

Contents

Outreach and Access in Adult Learning: Access in Rural Areas

1. Why focus on access to adult education in rural areas?

Adult education can play a fundamental role in tackling many of the growing inequalities in Europe. By improving wellbeing, self-confidence, social inclusion, as well as employability and economic conditions, adult education can decisively contribute to building communities that would reflect social justice, cohesion, solidarity, and provide equal opportunities for all of its citizens. That, however, is dependent on participation, and especially from those who could benefit most from developing their skills. Those least likely to access adult education are often the ones that need it most.

While every European citizen should have the right to quality education, this is yet far from reality. The percentage of adults that participate in adult education programs, even though it has been increasing in recent years, is still noticeable low. More specifically, and according to the statistical office of the European Union (Eurostat) and the latest results from the EU labour force survey (2018)[1], the participation rate in the EU stood at 11,1%. According to the same source, that percentage was only 0.2% higher than 2017.

The EU prioritizes the provision of equal opportunities for education, development, and prosperity for all its citizens, and promotes the establishment of various initiatives towards it. A characteristic and recent example is the

Education and Training 2020 (ET2020)[2], a strategic framework, where the EU encourages all the member countries to increase adult participation in education, among others.

Despite the attention given to the issue of the low numbers of adult participation in learning, the rates are still low. This phenomenon is growing even more in specific population groups in the EU, with big concern caused by adult participation in education in rural areas. According to the last Adult Education Survey (AES, 2016)[3], and more specifically, by analyzing the survey by degree of urbanization, participation rates in cities are 5% higher than in towns and suburbs, and 5% to 10% higher than in rural areas. It is understood that, since that is the average, in some European countries this gap is even larger, which is a huge problem, and action must be taken to address it.

Despite the significance of this issue, it has been noticed that proper and required attention is not paid to it. Learning in rural areas is not discussed as much as learning in urban spaces, which are mostly the main focus. Globally, a lot of attention has been dedicated to the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities[4], which is a policy-oriented network aiming to inspire, promote dialogue between cities, exchange knowledge, and

---

[1] Eurostat: The EU Labour Force Survey (2018). (At: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=sdg_04_60).

[2] European Policy Cooperation: ET 2020 framework. (at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-framework_en).

[3] Eurostat: Participation rate in education and training by degree of urbanisation. (at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_aes_105/default/table?lang=en).

[4] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL): Learning Cities. (at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/trng_aes_105/default/table?lang=en).
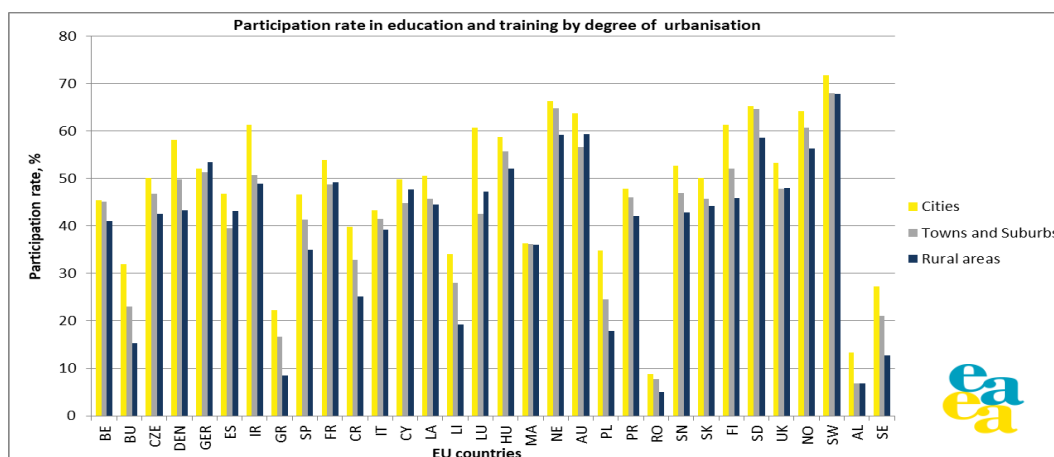
Figure 1. Participation rates in education and training by degree of urbanisation by regional breakdown, AES 2016

Source: Eurostat, Participation rate in education and training by degree of urbanisation [trng_aes_10]

share the best learning practices. On the other hand, learning in remote or rural communities does not seem to gain much importance politically or academically. Although adult learning in rural areas has, in some cases, a completely different context, it is not usually treated accordingly.

2. EAEA theme of the year 2020: outreach and access

Acknowledging the gaps in the provision of equal educational opportunities to adults in rural communities, as well as the lack of political discussion and guidelines regarding these, EAEA set outreach and access as its theme of the year 2020. More specifically, EAEA has devoted its attention to increasing participation in adult learning by investigating how outreach and accessibility of adult education can be fostered at different levels, and raising awareness of the importance of

learner-centred approaches in adult education.

Working on outreach and access is significant for ensuring that those who would benefit most from adult education can become a part of it. For them, outreach and access programmes can help not only in developing their confidence but also in providing them with skills to develop their employability and careers. Moreover, working on outreach and access is important for developing indirect benefits of adult education and learning, and also helps to keep participation rising.

Throughout the year, EAEA has collected adult education initiatives across Europe for their demonstration of innovation and excellence. EAEA Grundtvig Award highlights project results that produce new ideas, new partnerships, new methodologies, and a new understanding of how we can work in adult education, with a thematic focus on outreach and access.

3. Defining rural areas

There are many concepts defining rural areas. For some, rural is about the population density. For others, it is about distance from urban centers, geographical position in general or even is a "subjective state of mind" (E. Silver, 2017). For this paper, the short version of the new-definition of rural areas provided by the European Commission (2014)[5] and the new degree of urbanisation will be used. According to this definition, a rural area is a "thinly populated area, where more than 50% of the population lives in rural grid cells".

4. Rural roots of adult education

Adult education participation rates in rural areas remain noticeably low compared to their urban counterparts. In many, if not most, European countries, this difference has been evident for several years. Yet there are countries where adult education and learning is an integral part of the development and sustainability of rural areas and local communities, and there are even cases where adult education has deep roots in them.

4.1 The case of Ireland

Ireland holds a strong tradition in adult education, often also referred to as "community" education. Up to this day, there are many cases in Ireland where adult or community education provides spaces and

services by not setting learning as their sole purpose, but also strengthening the communities and supporting the local population.

Community and adult education in Ireland is inextricably connected with the idea of outreach and access programmes that target different community groups and aim to bring back to education people who otherwise would not have had this opportunity on their own. More specifically, one of the main directions of adult education in Ireland is focusing on adults who left the formal education system early on, without having the opportunity and knowledge on how to get re-integrated on it, seeking to increase their qualifications (EAEA, 2011). Typical examples of adult education programmes that focus on community-strengthening are Community Employment Drug Rehabilitation Schemes, Family Literacy programmes, and integrating and facilitating programmes for adults with learning disabilities (Ward & Payton, 2019).

Adult education in Ireland has, also, deep roots in the development of rural areas and communities. A great example of this is the White Paper on Adult Education (2000)[6], published by the Irish Government, and which aimed to become the starting point of the further development and expansion of adult education in Ireland. Furthermore, it brought adult education in rural areas to political attention, by highlighting the barriers that exist and by including a set of recommendations "to promote increased

---

[5] European Commission: A harmonised definition of cities and rural areas: the new degree of urbanisation. (at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/work/2014_01_new_urban.pdf).

[6] Ireland. Department of Education and Science, 'Learning for Life : White Paper on Adult Education', [other], Stationery Office, Dublin (at: https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/fe_aduled_wp.pdf).

access to mainstream adult education programmes" for vulnerable groups in rural areas (Ireland, 2000).

4.2 The case of Poland

Poland has a long history in terms of adult education. Its roots can be traced back to the period that followed the First World War and Poland's newly regained independence. As a large proportion of the Polish population lived in rural areas,, it was considered necessary to empower the peasants of the country and upgrade their economic, social, and political status, which led to various educational initiatives towards it (T. Maliszewski, 2014).

According to Maliszewski, the most interesting among those initiatives were folk high schools, which aimed at the "educational awakening of the Polish peasant class" and the provision of rural communities with "future leaders who would be devoted to their village and their homeland" and contribute to their further development. Polish folk high schools, focusing exclusively on adult education (over the age of 18), were based on the model that first developed in the Nordic countries, and more specifically, the idea of N. F. S Grundtvig for "the School for Life" (T. Maliszewski, 2014).

5. Challenges and barriers in rural settings

One reason that adult learners do not benefit from education is the existence of significant barriers that make their participation difficult or even impossible. Research has thoroughly examined the barriers to adult participation in education. Most of it is based on the categorization made by Johnstone and Riviera (1965), distinguishing two main categories of barriers to adult participation. The external barriers are "more or less external to the individual or at least beyond the individual's control", and the internal barriers, that "reflect personal attitudes, such as thinking one is too old to learn" (Merriam et al., 2007). This categorizationwill be used in this case to understand the barriers that keep adults in rural areas away from education.

5.1 External barriers

Most of the research that has explored the participation of adults in education does not consider rural areas as the unique context it is. That supports the claim that adult education in rural areas does not seem to gain much importance academically, something that needs to change shortly.

The available literature seems to agree upon the barriers to adult participation emerging across rural educational settings. Initially, and concerning the offered programmes, no flexibility, strict course scheduling, lack of information around courses, absence of assisting services, as well as an "overabundance of information irrelevant to the adult students" seem to be some of the most common barriers to participation (Steel & Fahy, 2011; Genco, 2007; Zeit, 2014).

Context of rural education

One of the barriers that requires further exploration is the existence of programmes that are not representative of the needs of rural adult learners. Part of the explanation can be found in the fact that in some countries curricula are rolled out nationally, which is not representative of the reality and needs of a rural society. The needs of rural learners are different than in urban centers, the reasons for their participation differ

considerably, as well as the conditions in which learning takes place. Additionally, for a large number of adult learners, the acquisition of skills and knowledge is synonymous with higher chances for employment. As job opportunities in rural areas are different than in the rest country and the qualifications needed might be quite specific, the programmes' content and goals need to be adapted accordingly.

Digital literacy

Digital learning has now, in many cases, become the norm. The Covid-19 pandemic has made the need for distance learning even bigger. In addition to the many benefits, this also creates several problems for some learners. Rural and remote learners have specific needs, whether in traditional or distance education. According to Bennet (2003), "rural communities lack a strong learning culture and rural residents may lack the literacy skills required to function in such a self-directed educational environment". Moreover, and according to Eurostat[7], in 2019, people from rural areas had the lowest level of digital skills among adults (48% had basic or above basic digital skills). Inadequate skills may prevent their participation in several training programmes offered nowadays, make it difficult for them to get informed about what is available, and challenging for education providers to reach them.
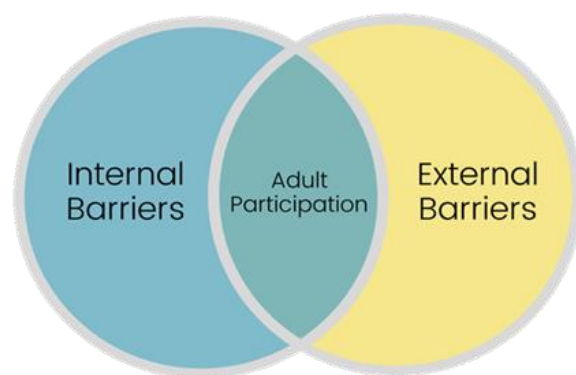

Figure 2. Barriers that affect the participation of adults in education and learning
Source: Johnstone and Rivera (1965). Volunteers for learning: A study of the educational pursuits of American adult

5.2 Internal barriers

Adults in rural areas encounter various barriers that prevent them from participating in educational processes. To a large extent, those barriers are about the programmes offered and the difficulty of reaching those population groups. On the other hand, some barriers are internal and reflect their personal beliefs and attitude.

Prior school experience

According to a study by Arnason & Valgeirsdottir (2015), who interviewed adult educators to address the concern regarding the barriers to adult participation in education, many learners believe that they are not capable of learning and could not even imagine themselves in the position of a learner. One reason that often leads to this kind of mentality is prior negative experiences and memories from school and education (Arnason & Valgeirsdottir, 2015). This phenomenon may be quite common in rural areas, where educational attainment is lower, school dropouts are higher, and also

---

[7] Eusostat: Urban and rural living in the EU (at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20200207-1).

students' learning outcomes are lower than in cities[8].

Rural/ urban distinction

"Rural and urban" terms have come to refer not only to geographical criteria. The distinction between residents of rural areas compared to those of urban environments "has resulted in rural communities being looked on as less desirable than their urban counterparts" (E. A. Silver, 2017). Moreover, it is quite common that "rural lives are viewed by society as deficient, unsophisticated, even laughable" (Howley, Howley & Johnson, 2014). According to Silver (2017), "these portrayals have far-reaching consequences in the lives of rural residents, affecting not only how others view them, but how they view themselves"

6. Successful case studies

6.1 Study Circles in Slovenia, Andragoški center Slovenije

Mentorica študijskega krožka Jana Tina Šilc, Šmarje pri Jelšah, Bralni študijski krožek – Beremo z Marco Košir, foto: Marko Samec

The history of **Study Circles** can be traced back to the 19th century New York (Bjerkaker, Summers, 2006). Study Circles, as a free general education form of voluntary adult learning, are quite popular in the Nordic countries, but have also been organized elsewhere. Slovenia is a perfect example, as the SC project there started back in 1993, and since then, has to show notable achievements. One of its most significant accomplishments is reaching different target groups, including vulnerable and underrepresented people, such as adults from rural areas, who, for various reasons, stay out of education.

Study Circles take place non-hierarchically and end with an action. As the name implies, it is a project of study circles, which are small groups for non-formal learning. Those small groups usually consist of five to twelve people, who, guided by the specially trained mentors, meet throughout three and a half month periods to study a topic of common interest for at least 25 hours. Participants are equal and have the freedom to determine themselves what, where, and how they will learn, but, always, by following the project's principles.

It is a project coordinated in the city of Ljubljana by the Slovenian Institute for Adults Education[9] (Andragoški center Slovenije) and operates throughout Slovenia. Initially, the Slovenian Adult Education Institute trains people who are interested in organizing SC. Then, those spread out all over the country and organize SC wherever they want, at their locations or institutions. The content of each SC can be quite open so that it can be easily

---

[8] Education and Training: Monitor 2018, Country `Analysis (at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/volume-2-2018-education-and-training-monitor-country-analysis.pdf).

[9] Andragoški center Slovenije (at: https://www.acs.si/)

adjusted to the needs and interests of the participants and each local society.

Although there is more than one goal, the overarching one is learning, enhancing the learning of adults. SC started twenty-five years ago, right after the independence of Slovenia, with the first goal of democratization. After two decades, participation in adult learning and the provision of access to vulnerable groups have become the primary goal. Furthermore, one more goal is adaptation. As circumstances nowadays change rapidly, the needs of people change at the same pace. Therefore, building the resilience of SC is crucial for meeting the real needs of the participants.

Throughout the years, the SC project has faced several challenges that made reaching people more complicated. Among the most common barriers, were situational, including young parents who both work and raise their children at the same time, so they lack time to participate, and dispositional, including older rural people lacking digital and proper information skills.

According to N. Bogataj, the SC project manager, one of the biggest challenges they face as ALE providers is the competition for new ideas between providers to get available funding. As N. Bogataj said, "during the last decades, welfare and funding were extreme, and that is a big problem, as it turned the focus of adult educators on a competition for money and not to their roles and goals as educators".

Finally, and again according to N. Bogataj, one more major issue "is the stiffness of the vertical flow between stakeholders. Vertical flow of the bridging and bonding social capital is slower than the changes we face, something that limits the flow of knowledge, experience, and ideas."

6.2 Project Mobile Library of Proença-a-Nova in Portugal

Source: http://opapalagui.blogspot.com/

(Nuno Marçal is the librarian behind the wheel and has a great passion for this work. He writes a blog where people can follow the project: http://opapalagui.blogspot.com/)

Mobile Library of Proença-a-Nova in Portugal is a project which targets the elderly lost and marginalized in rural and isolated small villages in the center of Portugal. The Mobile Library is part of the National Network of National Libraries and visits rural, remote villages, and mainly daycare and residential homes for the elderly regularly since 2006. The project's mainspring is caring about its people, the ones who work in it, and the ones who use it, even those who have not used it yet. It is a small van, with its backspace containing a large number and variety of books, by forming a library on wheels. The Proença-a-Nova Mobile Library is a service that offers access to information and knowledge and promotes books and reading and reflects values such as proximity,

periodicity, engagement, and friendship, which constitute its core elements.

The main goal of the Mobile Library project is to provide access to everyone by reaching even the most isolated populations. In addition to promoting reading, the "Bibliomobile" also functions as an advanced mobile post for municipal services, carries out seasonal socio-educational activities, provides first aid to people in need, and plays a significant role in facilitating the relationship between the citizen and the State. Finally, it also has an active social role, as it acts as an antidote against the loneliness of "people of accumulated youth" (elderly) by offering them the opportunity to take advantage of proximity services that go far beyond borrowing books.

Operating for over one decade, the Mobile Library has faced many challenges on its way to offering its services. As it is a project that mostly aims to reach the elderly in remote rural areas and engage them in reading and learning, their, in some cases, low literacy levels constituted a barrier towards their participation. One more barrier that is common in rural territories is the bad network connection, something that causes problems regarding reaching rural populations and keeping them informed about possible learning opportunities. Lastly, an also practical issue that sometimes limits the capabilities of the Mobile Library is the isolation and desertification of the interior of the country.

6.3 Longford Women's Link in Ireland

Source: Longford Women's Link

Longford Women's Link[10] (LWL) offers education under the guidelines of Women's Community Education (WCE) and is committed to adult education and community development based on the recognition that women have unequal access to resources and to influence and challenge these inequalities. The fundamental purpose that guides LWL is providing the women in Longford, Ireland, the power to fulfill their potential in a safe and equal society. LWL is committed to providing the very highest standards in WCE, a unique and distinctive approach that enables and empowers women to make choices about their lives by being: based on the on-going social analysis of gender equality and social inclusion issues, the commitment to women safety, growth, and well-being, the creation of space for feelings as well as dialogue, peer support, as well as informed by participative evaluation and self-evaluation.

LWL strives to provide equality of opportunity as an employer, delivering equal opportunities to all staff and potential staff in terms of recruitment, promotion, training, and access to opportunities. Its tutors are educated in the principles of equality and endeavor to be advocates for inclusion, access, and equal

---

[10] Longford Women's Link website (At: http://www.lwl.ie/)

opportunities as a core principle of social justice. More specifically, it provides annual training on equality awareness to ensure that the principles of equality are enshrined in all that they do and ever to the fore in their ethos. The focus of the teaching method is on creating collaborative learning experiences, which is achieved through dialogue and interactive lectures and discussions.

There are various ways LWL provides learning opportunities for women in Longford. Initially, it launched a new custom-built WCE training facility in September 2011, which provides a variety of much need courses, included university outreach. Furthermore, LWL offers accredited courses, is an ECDL (European Computer Driving License) approved centre, and also provides outreach courses for many Irish universities, organizations, and other institutions. That allows progress for learners within their community.

Despite the obstacles that exist and challenges that arise, LWL works toward removing barriers and making education and learning accessible. Education and training is just one of the several services offered by Longford Women's Link. Its integrated approach allows learners to access much-needed support and services, by always taking into consideration the barriers of fees, childcare, transport, caring responsibilities, among others.

7. Recommendations

Adult education providers play a significant role in reaching new learners, providing access, and engaging them in adult education. The consistency and success of their work do not depend solely on them, but also the existence of support policies. The following section describes recommendations both for adult education providers and policy-makers on how to introduce outreach and access provision or put into effect elements of outreach approach in adult learning and education.

7.1 Recommendations for providers

Study the potential target group, identify their needs and their context, and develop a plan or strategy according to them. Identifying the learners' needs, the challenges they face, as well as the barriers that prevent them from participating in educational processes, is the first step. Developing your strategy by also trying to solve their problems and offer them suitable options is the best way to bring them closer. Well-developed outreach strategies should include the most difficult to reach and the ones that are at a higher risk of marginalization and social exclusion.

Make learners part of the whole process, and develop it with them, not for them. Including learners in the design, development, and evaluation phases of a project is the best way to ensure that it reflects their real needs and keep them engaged in learning in the long-term.

Flatten any organizational structure that is time and energy-demanding. A horizontal organizational structure creates fertile ground for improved and efficient communication between members and gives the functioning way the reflexes to keep up with the rapid changes the educational field faces.

7.2 Recommendations for policy-makers

Create synergies to develop coherent adult learning outreach policies that meet the needs of learners. Developing effective policies for difficult to reach target groups presupposes having good knowledge of them. Collaborating with people who are closer to their 'reality' and environment is crucial so that policies reflect their real needs and stay relevant as much as possible.

Recognize non-formal adult education and its value for citizens and societies, and provide adequate funding. In some countries, non-formal adult learning still remains on the fringe of the education sector, lacking policy recognition and consequently adequate funding. Recent findings of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning[11] confirm that better financial support of adult learning and education is linked to rising participation rates (UIL, 2019). Non-formal adult education opportunities need to be available to all adults to foster their active participation in society, and to allow the outreach approach to be implemented.

Recognize Community Education as a unique sector. The recognition of community education as a sector will lead it to have its ring-fenced funding that allows for full cost recovery. That will give community education providers the capacity to deliver on their strategic priorities.

---

[11] UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning website (at: https://uil.unesco.org/)

References

Bennett, G. (2003). Strangers in a strange land: Rural learners in distance education (Unpublished master's thesis). St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS.

Bjerkaker, S., Summers, J., & National institute of adult continuing education (England / Wales). (2006). *Learning democratically using study circles*. Leicester: NIACE.

E. A. Silver (2017). Rural Adults In Education: Why Don't They Come? A Curriculum Addressing Dispositional Barriers to Participation.

European Association for the Education of Adults (2011). Country Report on Adult Education in IRELAND, Helsinki, 2011. 4

F Ward, P. Ayton (2019). A Short History of the Adult Literacy Service and The Foundation of the Adult Literacy Organisers Association.

FinALE (2018). Invest in adult learning. Executive summary of the outcomes of the FinALE project.

Howley, C. B., Howley, A., & Johnson, J. D. (Eds.). (2014). Dynamics of Social Class: Race, and Place in Rural Education. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Ireland. Department of Education and Science, 'Learning for Life : White Paper on Adult Education', [other], Stationery Office, Dublin, 2000-07

Johnstone, J. W. & Rivera, R. J. (1965). Volunteers for learning: A study of the educational pursuits of American adults. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.

L. Dijkstra, H. Poelman (2014). European Commission, Regional Working Paper 2014: A harmonised definition of cities and rural areas: the new degree of urbanisation.

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. (2007). Learning in adulthood: a comprehensive guide. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

T. Maliszewski (2014). Rural Folk High Schools in Poland – to Face War and its Outcomes (1937-1948). 1-2.

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2019). 4th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education. Leave No One Behind: Participation, Equity and Inclusion.

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS