

On the Way towards EU Integration: Countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe Shaping Lifelong Learning Systems

Joint statement of the organisers

On 13th of March 2024 representatives from Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo¹, Serbia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Ukraine gathered for a professional exchange on achievements and remaining challenges in the process of embedding Adult Learning and Education (ALE) into Lifelong Learning systems (LLL), and coordinating with European Union policies, trends and good practices in the member states.

Participants represented Ministries of Education, Agencies for Adult Education, Lifelong Learning or Skills Development, academia and civil society from national Adult Education associations, platforms, and networks. Experts from DVV International, the European Association for the Education of Adults, European Training Foundation, International Council for Adult Education, as well as from the European Commission and Committee of the Regions and from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning shared their knowledge and advice on policy reforms that enhance adult learning and education.

In discussing progress, approaches, frameworks and recommendations, the high-level politicians, civil servants and civil society representatives acknowledged the relevance of adult learning and education for personal, societal and economic development. The convergence to adult learning priorities stated by the EU Pillar of Social Rights and the new Adult Learning Agenda were further underlined, together with the UNESCO World Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII) in 2022 that declared: "... adult education is part of the right to education and crucial for the realization of all human rights."

The European Skills Agenda, moreover, embraces in a coherent concept of different approaches and instruments that are crucial to advance adult learning, upskilling and reskilling for a just transition that leaves no one behind. These instruments aim at access and flexible pathways, and include skills needs' anticipation, validation of non-formal and informal learning, work on micro-credential, skills and qualification recognition, quality assurance, career guidance, educators' professional development, multi-stakeholder pacts, and innovative financing schemes.

The event therefore provided the opportunity to view adult learning and education as an area for further cooperation with the European Union, its organisations and international partners. Perspectives to foster the development of the sector were presented and discussed with stakeholders in the EU. In that context, the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

recent opening of accession negotiations with, or granting of candidate status to, three Eastern Europe countries are particularly relevant.

Following on the insights from the presentations and discussions, and commitment of the participating countries, the organisers of the event – DVV International, EAEA and ETF and - declare their willingness to continue this professional exchange and support partners from participating countries in policies and activities which are oriented towards further EU integration. In this context, it is of high importance to pay attention in the participating countries to following aspects:

- ALE is a core component of Lifelong Learning and it is broader than skills for the labour market. Furthermore, while reforming ALE and LLL systems, the holistic understanding as implied by the Recommendations on Adult Learning and Education should be a guiding principle².
- Education is a fundamental human right that should be exercised throughout one's life. To ensure that citizens have access to education, it is necessary to develop Lifelong Learning strategies, in which Adult Learning and Education plays a key role. These strategies should be based on inclusive approaches to ensure that no one is left behind.
- Implementation of inclusive ALE strategies requires targeted action plans and substantial public funding.
- Reforming and shaping the ALE sector should be based on clear responsibilities and on involvement of all relevant stakeholders at all levels from national to local. Efficient governance mechanisms for ALE also builds on continuous quality assurance as well as data collection, monitoring and evaluation.
- As all other subdivisions of education sector, ALE also needs providers. And establishment of such institutions might need special promotion on the national or local levels.
- Like all other subdivisions of the education sector, Adult and Lifelong Education also requires strong providers. Professionalisation, innovation and capacities should be supported at the national or local levels.

On behalf of DVV International, EAEA and ETF, Brussels, 13th March 2024.

² Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (RALE), adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in 2015, including its definition of ALE and identification of three key fields of learning: literacy and basic skills; continuing education and vocational skills; and liberal, popular and community education and citizenship skills.