

## Policy Brief for National Stakeholders

### High-Level Round Table ‘A Framework to drive Adult Learning Reforms. Advancing lifelong learning in the context of EU accession and neighbourhood’

Torino (Italy). November 18-19, 2025

## Executive Overview

The High-Level Round Table ‘A Framework to drive Adult Learning Reforms’ organised by the ETF-DVV International in Torino, addressed a central question: how can countries develop Adult Learning Systems (ALS) that simultaneously raise participation and reduce inequality? This question is central in EU policies that extend to Member States as well as Enlargement and Neighbourhood regions, whereby the meeting promoted cooperation and policy learning.

Over two days, discussions converged on the insight that durable success requires moving beyond fragmented interventions towards integrated systems in which education, labour market policy, social welfare, and civil society function as interdependent components rather than isolated sectors. This brief synthesises key insights and implementation approaches to support policymakers who wish to consolidate and strengthen their ALS.

## Understanding Adult Learning Systems

The ALS approach differs fundamentally from treating adult learning and education as a collection of separate programmes or as a set of participation rates. ALS are complex, multi-level configurations in which interdependencies between education provision, labour market dynamics, and welfare policies give rise to outcomes that cannot be produced by single interventions alone. High participation and low inequality do not emerge simply because some courses are excellent or one policy has been adopted; they result from how multiple components of the system work together over time.

In this perspective, fragmentation is an impediment to effective adult education and learning. When it is scattered across ministries, funding streams, and governance levels, with weak connections between them, the system becomes difficult to steer and too marginal to generate significant impact. Successful systems, therefore, depend on deliberate coordination mechanisms that operate both horizontally, across policy domains such as education, employment, social policy, and regional development, and vertically, from the national level down to regional and local levels. National strategies need to be explicit about coordination and clear responsibilities among the stakeholders involved if they are to impact participation of adults in education and learning (ALE). Stronger awareness of all actors is needed to prevent duplication, close gaps in provision and effective outreach of adult people.

## Building the Foundation: Three-Layer Governance Architecture

In recent years, candidate, potential candidate and neighbour countries have made important progress in creating the basic governance structures for adult education and learning, and in

establishing key tools for building their ALS at the national level. Three governance frameworks are especially important, even though countries are at different stages in each area.

### ***Legal Framework***

The first framework is the legal foundation. Legislation provides the basic legitimacy and structure for adult education and learning. At this stage, most countries feature various laws that tackle ALE rather than unified laws, which is a factor contributing to fragmentation and partly explaining why coordination bodies are the exception not the rule. National Qualifications Frameworks in place, however, are significant, because they can potentially create seamless learning pathways and enable the recognition of diverse forms of learning, including non-formal education when this is linked to such frameworks.

### ***Strategic Planning***

The second framework is strategic planning. This translates legal provisions into clear priorities and concrete lines of action through comprehensive ALE plans. Strategic planning sets realistic targets that are coherent with the vision, indicates priority groups if relevant and embeds robust quality assurance mechanisms, acknowledging that an expansion of provision without quality control will undermine the credibility of the system. Effective strategies also recognise that ALE is part of lifelong learning (LLL), as such it extends beyond formal education and beyond the labour market, encompassing both economic returns and broader social, civic, and personal benefits. Stability in policy direction is crucial here: *evidence from existing EU ALS indicates that systems which have experienced gradual layering and refinement of policies, rather than abrupt shifts in direction over the last two decades, tend to achieve higher participation rates and lower inequality in organised adult learning.*

### ***Financing mechanisms***

The third framework concerns financing mechanisms. Financing determines which policy measures are implemented, at what scale and with what intensity. It shapes the coordination of ALS, for example, through sectoral councils or guidance services; it affects the supply of learning opportunities, such as training for vulnerable groups or second-chance to complete basic education; and it influences demand for learning through instruments such as awareness campaigns, voucher schemes or levy and tax arrangements for companies. The central question is how financing can be designed as incentive for desirable behaviours (such as high-quality provision, sustained learner participation, and meaningful employer engagement) while directing resources towards priority populations. Experience from successful ALS points to *the importance of combining supply-side and demand-side measures with dedicated financial support for coordination instruments that focus explicitly on key target groups.*

## **From Policy Design to Implementation**

Participants at the Torino meeting repeatedly emphasised the implementation gap. Legislation and investment open up possibilities, but they do not by themselves deliver outcomes. The

persistent deficit lies in the distance between policy adoption and policy impact. The discussions suggested that effective implementation rests on three core dimensions: co-creation with stakeholders, institutionalised coordination, and professional capacity.

### ***Co-creation of Policies***

Co-creation marks a shift from traditional consultation towards the genuine joint design of policy measures, including financing tools. In several countries, promising approaches include voucher programmes developed in collaboration with local actors; the inclusion of stakeholders in working groups that actively design, test, and refine policy instruments; and social partnership arrangements that enable cross-sector associations to participate in permanent working bodies at national and local levels. These practices give stability to platforms that can detect and address implementation challenges in a timely manner, and where those closest to delivery can generate solutions. The underlying lesson is straightforward: *social partners and other stakeholders need to be involved during policy design, not merely informed afterwards*. Implementation tends to improve markedly when those responsible for delivering measures also feel that they own and shape the policy framework.

### ***Institutionalisation of coordination***

Coordination itself does not arise spontaneously. It requires explicit institutional arrangements with clearly defined mandates, regular meeting structures, and identifiable responsibilities for results. Since ALE cut across several ministries, agencies and private sector, mechanisms are needed that transcend sectoral and administrative silos. A systematic mapping of actors responsible for different domains of ALS in each country is a necessary first step: it is not possible to coordinate what has not been identified. Coordination mechanisms must be institutionalised rather than dependent on particular individuals personalities; they need to function at national as well as regional and local levels, and they require formal structures, dedicated resources, and explicit mandates that can withstand changes in political leadership.

### ***Professional capacity***

A third dimension of implementation concerns professional capacity. This includes, first, the standards, training, and working conditions of those who provide education and training; and second, the capacity for evidence-based governance within ministries, agencies, and intermediary organisations. Effective ALS require reliable data to monitor system performance, identify priority target groups and evaluate the impact of policy interventions. Without sufficient professional capacity and appropriate data infrastructures, even coherent policy packages risk remaining largely symbolic.

## **Quality, Inclusiveness, and Participation**

Current EU goals envisage that by 2030, 60 per cent of the adult population should participate in formal or non-formal education within a twelve-month period. Many countries remain a long way from this benchmark. At the same time, participation patterns are strongly unequal: low-

skilled workers, older adults, and people in precarious employment or at the margins of the labour market consistently participate less, thereby reinforcing existing social and economic inequalities. Achieving the 60 per cent target while improving equity requires approaches that differ significantly from those that work well for already motivated and well-resourced learners.

### ***Quality Creates Demand***

One central insight is that quality creates its own demand. When providers meet clear standards, when adult educators are professionalised through appropriate qualifications and career structures, and when programmes lead to meaningful outcomes, learners are more likely to return and to encourage others to participate. In this respect, the quality and inclusiveness of initial schooling exert a long-term influence on adult learning trajectories: populations with higher levels of initial education tend to show higher rates of participation in adult learning over the life course. Developing quality in adult learning and education, therefore, means defining professional standards for adult educators, establishing structured training and progression pathways, and putting in place quality assurance mechanisms that cover both providers and programmes.

### ***Inclusiveness Needs Direct Policy Support***

At the same time, inclusiveness does not follow automatically from general measures. It requires direct policy support for the most vulnerable groups, including adults with very low levels of literacy and numeracy, older adults, migrants, and others facing cumulative disadvantages. Policies that successfully reach these groups typically address not only educational barriers but also social and institutional obstacles, such as childcare needs, transport difficulties, or the absence of a credible link between training and realistic job opportunities.

To make systems accessible for vulnerable groups, three dimensions are particularly important: financial, geographic, and accessibility. Provision must be free or heavily subsidised for people experiencing vulnerable situations, recognising that even modest fees can deter their participation. Learning opportunities need to be distributed geographically so they are close to where people live and work, especially in rural areas and smaller communities. Finally, provision must take account of the time constraints associated with employment and care responsibilities, which implies flexible schedules and formats and greater alignment with family and employment policies.

### ***Proactive Outreach***

Relying solely on self-enrolment tends to reproduce existing inequalities, because those who are already confident in educational settings are more likely to come forward. Proactive outreach, therefore, becomes a central strategy. This involves regular information campaigns, mapping potential learners and meeting them in workplaces, community centres, social services offices and other everyday settings, and actively encouraging participation rather than waiting for individuals to seek out opportunities on their own. More successful European ALS often have significantly higher levels of public awareness of available measures — such as voucher

schemes — and of publicly funded learning opportunities, including apprenticeship schemes, than less successful systems.

Developing a well-functioning system of career and learning guidance is a crucial complement to outreach. Such systems must serve the entire adult population rather than focusing only on young people, help adults navigate the complexity of ALS, and connect individuals with learning opportunities that are appropriate to their needs, aspirations, and circumstances. In this way, guidance can function as a key interface between individuals and the wider ALS, ensuring that expanded provision and improved governance translate into genuine, widely shared participation.

## Conclusion

In sum, the Torino High-Level Round Table highlighted that, in the context of EU accession and neighbourhood, the central task is to build coherent, well-governed ALS in which legal frameworks, strategic planning and sustainable financing are closely aligned with effective implementation. Data collection and analysis play a role in good governance of ALS and, more generally, LLL. Lasting progress will depend on embedding co-creation with stakeholders, institutionalising coordination across sectors and levels of governance, and strengthening professional and analytical capacities to support evidence-based decision-making.

At the same time, the dual challenge of achieving the 60 per cent participation benchmark and reducing inequality requires a strong emphasis on quality, so that learning experiences are meaningful and trusted, and on inclusiveness, so that every adult can access opportunities that fit their lives. Proactive outreach and comprehensive guidance services are therefore essential to ensure that adults not only know about available measures but can also navigate complex provision and identify pathways that respond to their needs and aspirations. Efforts to nourish a learning culture in the society will raise awareness among potential learners and motivate stakeholders to play a role.

Last but not least, policy learning and cooperation can foster reforms in ALE. By meeting in Torino, peers have enhanced collective understanding and commitment to well-performing and inclusive, life deep and life wide ALS. The ETF and DVV International will continue supporting these positive processes in the context of EU accession and neighbourhood.