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ADULT LEARNING SYSTEMS AND THEIR GOVERNANCE

A conceptual framework

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adult learning is increasingly pivotal to Europe's economic competitiveness, productivity growth, as well as social cohesion and democratic resilience. Yet, across many countries, participation remains uneven and highly stratified: adults with lower initial education, unstable employment, or weaker social networks are consistently less likely to engage in organised learning, even though they would usually have the most to gain. Evidence has consistently confirmed this persistent inverse relationship between need and participation. This paper suggests that it is linked to a system problem that reflects how opportunities are structured, communicated, financed, and recognised.

The ETF approach to adult learning encourages a shift in policy "optics": from focusing on individual programmes, providers, or single instruments to analysing the Adult Learning System (ALS) as a whole. It provides a conceptual framework for diagnosing where systems fail (often "at the seams" between sectors and governance levels) and for identifying governance levers that create enabling conditions for stronger performance. The aim is to help policymakers and stakeholders raise overall participation while reducing inequalities in access and the benefits that adult learning can deliver.

The ALS framework used in the report distinguishes three interacting dynamics. *Demand* concerns the factors that shape adults' and organisations' intention to participate (needs and aspirations, perceived returns, time and cost constraints, awareness of opportunities, and employer and community incentives). *Supply* refers to the availability, accessibility, flexibility, and quality of provision. To make supply legible, the paper maps four institutional clusters of organised adult learning: (1) adult learning embedded in the formal education system (including second-chance and qualification-bearing pathways), (2) training linked to welfare and activation policies, (3) workplace learning and labour-market institutions, and (4) civil society and community-based learning with broader social and civic purposes. *Coordination* describes the mechanisms that connect demand and supply and reduce fragmentation across ministries and tiers of government (macro level), across sectors and territories (meso level), and through guidance and navigation support for individuals (micro level).

Because these dynamics interact, improvements in one area (for example, subsidising course fees) may have limited impact if other conditions remain misaligned (such as weak outreach, lack of recognition, or fragmented responsibilities). The paper therefore organises governance into four foundational pillars that, together, shape the "system architecture" of adult learning: (1) **legal frameworks** that define adult learning, clarify entitlements and responsibilities, and recognise diverse forms of learning and provider types; (2) **strategic planning** that sets priorities, targets, and an implementation architecture across education, employment, and social inclusion; (3) **institutional arrangements** that make delivery possible in practice, including coordination bodies, data and monitoring systems, and proportionate quality assurance; and (4) **financing mechanisms** that mobilise sustainable resources and align incentives across supply, demand, and coordination, especially for equity-oriented measures and underfunded learning purposes.

To move beyond one-dimensional performance debates, the report proposes a multi-dimensional outcome profile for assessing ALS. **Scope** captures broad participation across the adult life course and across the different supply clusters, rather than reliance on a narrow segment of State- or employer-funded training. **Equity** considers how opportunities and outcomes are distributed across groups and places, focusing on participation gaps linked to education, employment status, gender, migration background, age, and territory. **Capability development** concerns what adults actually gain, skills and competences that are durable and useful, and whether these gains translate into wider economic, social, and civic benefits over time. This approach implies that monitoring should connect participation data to quality, completion, learning outcomes, and longer-term effects, and should be used to support continuous improvement rather than compliance alone.

Overall, the paper is intended as a diagnostic and design resource for governments and stakeholders working to strengthen adult learning in a context of technological change, demographic ageing, and widening skills and participation gaps. It clarifies what should be mapped and monitored in an ALS, where coordination failures are likely to arise, and which governance levers are most relevant for building an enabling environment.

Key policy pointers in a nutshell

- Adopt a system lens: work on interactions across education, labour-market and welfare institutions to shape outcomes. Single programmes rarely shift performance at scale.
- Design for equity: combine outreach, guidance and targeted financial support instead of relying on "open access", to ensure that participation increases also among those with the greatest need.
- Fix coordination failures: strengthen coordination at macro, meso and micro levels to prevent breakdowns "at the seams" between ministries, governance levels and delivery channels.
- Strengthen the four governance pillars: align legal frameworks, strategy and targets, institutional arrangements (including data/QA), and financing with agreed priorities.
- Measure what matters: track a multi-dimensional outcome profile (scope, equity and capability development) and use evidence to refine policy over time.

INTRODUCTION

Adult learning has long held a marginal position in education policy – endorsed in principle but fragmented in practice. Yet the pressures now reshaping economies, labour markets, welfare systems, and civic life have made the question of how adults continue to learn and why so many do not, one of the most consequential challenges of our time and even more so for the coming decade. Technological disruption, demographic ageing, and the expanding demands of digital citizenship are not future risks; they are present realities already testing the adaptive capacity of societies across Europe and beyond.

Against this backdrop, persistent inequalities in adult learning participation are not simply a statistical curiosity. They signal a structural failure. Adults with lower initial education, precarious employment, or migrant backgrounds, i.e., those with the most to gain from continued learning, consistently participate the least (ETF, 2022; OECD, 2025). This inverse relationship between need and access is not incidental or only due to demand-side reasons, like gaps in adults' motivation. It reflects the design, or more often, the absence of coherent design, of the systems meant to support participation.

This ETF paper argues that understanding these failures and making adult learning an asset of lifelong learning policies requires a shift in analytical optics: from individual programmes, providers, and participation rates to a system-level account of the institutions, incentives, and governance arrangements that, together with adults' preferences and circumstances, shape who learns, what they learn, and under what conditions. Adult learning does not fail only at the margins; it fails at the seams – where education policy meets labour-market activation, where national frameworks meet local delivery, and where political ambition meets implementation capacity.

Drawing on comparative research and a governance framework developed by the ETF, and building on the ETF cooperation with DVV International (ETF-DVV International, 2025), the paper sets out a conceptual architecture for analysing Adult Learning Systems (ALS) as integrated configurations of demand, supply, and coordination, shaped by four foundational governance pillars: legal frameworks, strategic planning, institutional arrangements, and financing mechanisms (Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025; 2026fc). It asks not only what quality and effective systems do, but how they sustain the conditions under which equitable and effective adult learning becomes possible, and why so many systems, despite formal commitments to lifelong learning, fall short.

This paper understands adult learning as a broad repertoire of intentional activities through which adults develop skills and capabilities, supporting participation in working life as well as in domains beyond work. Adult learning takes place across settings with varying degrees of institutionalisation and extends well beyond educational organisations encompassing workplaces, families, communities, and the civic sphere. Conventionally, three principal and partially overlapping types of adult learning are distinguished: formal, non-formal and informal (European Commission, 2006; Brooks & Burton, 2008; CLA, 2016)[1].

While acknowledging the importance and prevalence of informal learning (OECD, 2025a), this paper concentrates on organised adult learning, examining formal and non-formal provision. Formal and non-formal learning comprise the segment of adult learning most directly influenced by public policy, since they involve identifiable providers, programmes, funding arrangements and, at times, quality-assurance mechanisms. Formal adult learning, in addition, can be constrained by educational and assessment standards, and binding access and completion requirements. They also constitute the main focus of system-level monitoring by the European Union (Council of the European Union, 2021), whose comparative benchmarks are based only on participation in organised learning. Informal learning, by contrast, is not as clearly bounded; it is harder to regulate and measure. Focusing on organised adult learning, therefore, permits a more precise analysis of governance, while recognising that substantial learning also takes place outside organised provision.

[1] Glossary | CEDEFOP

1. FROM ADULT LEARNING TO SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

Late modern societies increasingly rely on adults' capacity to update skills, navigate occupational transitions, and engage in civic life amid technological and demographic change. Adult learning, in other words, underpins not only productivity and employability, but also inclusion, resilience, and people's well-being in fast-changing societies (EC, 2020; OECD, 2025b).

Adult learning is often praised for what makes it distinctive: it unfolds across a socially heterogeneous population, in a wide variety of settings, and for an equally wide variety of purposes (Hodge et al., 2025; Milana et al., 2025). Yet this same heterogeneity is what makes adult learning difficult to govern. Unlike initial education, which is comparatively bounded by age cohorts, standardised curricula, and stable institutional jurisdictions, adult learning is diffuse, episodic, and unevenly distributed across groups. Patterns of engagement in adult learning are strongly stratified by prior education, employment status, migration histories, health, and local opportunity structures (Boeren, 2016; Blossfeld et al., 2020). As a result, adult learning rarely appears as a single, legible policy domain. It is better understood as an assemblage of learning activities embedded in different sectors and governed through different logics (Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025). The central dilemma follows directly: the field's greatest strength – diversity of learners and learning contexts – is also its greatest vulnerability.

A system-level perspective responds to this challenge by shifting the unit of analysis to the wider system that generates learning opportunities. Adult learning emerges from the alignment or misalignment of incentives, institutions, and actors that together shape who learns, what they learn, when they learn, and with what consequences. Within this system, participation is influenced, inter alia, by how financing arrangements reward providers and employers; how outreach and guidance facilitate access; how labour-market institutions value credentials and demand upskilling and reskilling; how the welfare system, eligibility rules and information channels distribute availability of learning opportunities, often in alliance with social partners and other intermediary organisations; how employers engage in offering opportunities of good quality. Crucially, these elements interact. Improving one component (for example, subsidising tuition) will have a limited effect if other components (e.g., adults' motivation, time constraints, employer incentives, recognition of learning, or geographical access) remain misaligned.

This perspective is central for policy-making. Adult learning policy rarely fails because a single instrument is poorly designed. More often, it fails because coordination breaks down across sectors, governance levels, and life-course phases (Desjardins, 2017; OECD, 2026fc). Fragmented responsibilities, most commonly between education and labour ministries, between national and regional authorities, between public services and employers, and between formal institutions and community providers, produce gaps through which learners fall.

System-level analysis makes these coordination failures visible and, importantly, actionable. It enables policymakers to diagnose whether low participation in adult learning reflects, for example, weak outreach and guidance, inadequate provision in key institutional clusters, misaligned employer incentives, fragmented governance arrangements, or financing mechanisms that reproduce inequality.

Framed this way, a system perspective is not an academic overlay on a messy reality. It is a practical diagnostic and design tool for building ALS that are adaptive, equitable, and robust under contemporary pressures. If adult learning is to function as a genuine vehicle for inclusion, productivity, and capability development across the life course, policy must be able to act on the dynamics of relationships that produce participation and outcomes. This paper, therefore, advances a system-level approach to grasp adult learning's fragmentation without being trapped by it, and to develop policy architectures that support diverse learners.

1.1 Aims and Organisation of the Report

Building on this starting point, this paper pursues three interrelated aims:

1. It introduces an analytical framework of Adult Learning Systems (ALS) for understanding the structures and dynamics that shape adult learning participation and associated learning outcomes.
2. It maps the key pillars of ALS governance that affect these dynamics.
3. It discusses the conditions under which ALS can be both effective and inclusive – i.e., reaching a high participation rate in adult learning while sustaining low levels of social inequality in access, and supporting adults' capabilities beyond post-initial education.

The report is organised into four parts, aligned with the aims set out above. Section 1 introduces the framework and its aims. Section 2 addresses the first research objective and provides a more detailed description of the ALS analytical framework. Section 3 maps the principal layers of ALS governance, followed by Section 4, which outlines the key features of high-quality, effective ALS.

This paper is published in combination with the systematic ETF adult learning mapping in selected EU candidate countries and potential candidate (ETF, 2026, forthcoming) and provides the theoretical framework for its analysis.

1.2 Framework

To achieve these aims, the paper draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives. First, it builds on comparative research on ALS (Saar et al., 2013a, 2013b; Desjardins, 2017; Desjardins & Ioannidou, 2020; Kalenda, 2024; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025; OECD, 2023, 2026fc). Second, it adopts a governance framework developed by the ETF, which also takes into account the long-standing cooperation with DVV International, to analyse governance levels and functions in selected EU candidate countries and potential candidate[2] (DVV International, 2020; ETF, 2022; ETF-DVV International, 2025; Hinzen & Baratov, 2025).

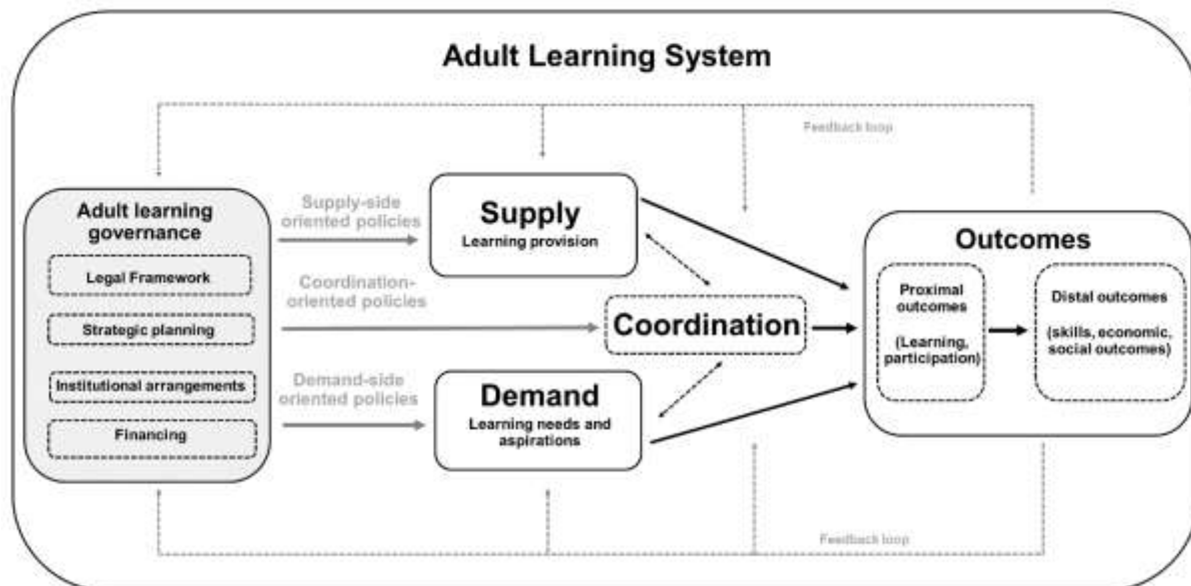
Taken together, these perspectives offer a coherent conceptual architecture that connects (1) governance arrangements to (2) system dynamics and (3) outcomes, and (4) supports actionable policy recommendations. Yet the conceptual architecture (governance, system, outcomes, policy) is sufficiently broad to allow adaptation to diverse contexts, especially with regard to policy actions that will inevitably depend on local institutions and circumstances. An overview of the framework is presented in Figure 1.

The analytical framework distinguishes the governance of ALS from the system dynamics that shape participation and outcomes. This distinction matters because governance does not translate into adult learning impact directly or linearly: in any country, the economic structure, social conditions, administrative culture, organisations' capacity and individual preferences are important variables at play that can mediate the effects of governance.

Governance is reflected in the institutional and policy architecture, including strategies and legislation, the allocation of roles and responsibilities, financing and incentives, and supporting instruments such as quality assurance, target group identification, skills assessment and anticipation, data collection, monitoring and evaluation, which together form conditions under which adult learning operates.

[2] Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine and Kosovo. 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. In this report, we call the eight economies 'countries' for the sake of the report readability.

Figure 1. The analytical framework: Interaction of Adult Learning (AL) governance with the Adult Learning System



Source: author, based on ETF-DVV International (2025), OECD (2026fc), Desjardins & Kalenda (2026fc).

Within this governance context, ALS are conceptualised as the interaction of three underlying dynamics: *demand, supply*, and *coordination*. Demand captures the determinants of participation, including various learning needs, aspirations, motivation, time and cost constraints, awareness of opportunities, perceived returns, and employer and community incentives. Supply refers to the availability, accessibility, and quality of learning opportunities across institutional domains, including education and training providers, workplace learning, welfare-state provision, and provision within civil society. Coordination encompasses mechanisms that align demand and supply and enable individuals and employers to navigate opportunities, including career guidance and referral pathways between services.

These dynamics generate **outcomes**. In the short term, they contribute to defining participation and learning results (e.g., completion, attainment, or skill gains). Over time, they may contribute to more distal outcomes, including employability, productivity, capability, civic engagement, and health outcomes, depending on contextual factors and the relevance of learning to labour-market and social needs. Moreover, these outcomes shall influence adult learning policy through feedback loops and through governments' normative assumptions about which adult learning outcomes matter most.

Policy action can influence each dynamic through *supply-side policies* (expanding provision, improving quality and flexibility, increasing outreach services and lowering entry barriers), *demand-side policies* (promoting a learning culture, reducing constraints, strengthening incentives, positive feedback and trust, supporting individuals, communities and firms), and *coordination policies* (guidance, information, recognition, needs assessment and matching, alignment across institutions and sectors, production and use of evidence, partnership and co-creation with relevant actors[3], and engagement of local levels).

Effective ALS governance, therefore, requires a *connected approach across these dimensions*. High participation is unlikely to be achieved through expanding provision alone; it also depends on incentives and people's capabilities to participate, as well as navigational support that reduces information and transaction costs, combined with inter-institutional alignment around clear objectives and targets.

[3] Co-creation is used to indicate joint design especially involving users, joint delivery by public sector and stakeholders, etc. It may include input of non-public actors into policies, or to terms of reference of large programmes.

2. ADULT LEARNING SYSTEMS

Adult Learning Systems (ALS) are interconnected configurations of institutions, policies, and actors that, within a given national context and learners' circumstances, shape who learns what, when, where, and how, across the adult life course (Desjardins & Kalenda, 2026fc). Three of their features are central to understanding their dynamics.

First, ALS extend beyond public provision and state governance. They encompass the full range of relevant public but also private stakeholders (e.g., employers, social partners, and civil society organisations) whose combined decisions and practices structure adult learning opportunities.

Second, ALS are not simply an aggregation of programmes or providers. Their outcomes depend on how components interact over time, producing emergent properties, such as participation patterns across different forms of organised adult learning and their associated effects, that no single element can generate in isolation.

Third, ALS are highly heterogeneous. Their institutional configurations sit at the intersection of education, labour markets, welfare regimes, and civic sectors (Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025). This cross-sectoral embeddedness complicates conceptualisation and steering. Coordination, therefore, becomes a central governance problem in adult learning. This heterogeneity also makes it difficult to establish ALS as a unified political object.

The ALS framework distinguishes three interrelated dynamics (see Figure 1) that shape the occurrence of adult learning: demand, supply, and coordination, and that lead to learning outcomes (OECD, 2026fc; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2026fc).

2.1 Demand for Adult Learning

Demand for adult learning refers to individuals, groups, and organisations' expressed intention to engage in organised learning. It is grounded in learning needs, the gap between an individual's current capabilities and those required to function effectively in a given social context, and shaped by learning aspirations, which reflect the value adults assign to particular forms of knowledge, skill, and personal development. Needs and aspirations do not automatically translate into expressed demand: the conversion of a learning need into an intention to participate depends on how adults perceive both the benefits of learning and the constraints that stand between them and participation (Baert et al., 2006; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009; Rubenson, 2018). Understanding demand, therefore, requires attention to individual agency, structural context, and the collective actors who articulate and mediate learning priorities within governance arenas. Finally, demand is not uniformly distributed across the adult population. It is socially structured by the same factors that underpin unequal access to education, employment, and social participation.

2.1.1 Structural and Contextual Drivers of Individual Demand

Beyond individual characteristics, demand for adult learning relates to structural conditions that vary across national contexts and evolve over time. Three sets of drivers are analytically distinguishable.

The first is the occupational structure and the skill intensity of work. Demand for job-related adult learning is strongly influenced by a country's employment composition and the extent to which continuous skills updating is required across its occupational landscape. Countries with a larger share of high-skilled jobs, high task complexity, and a sizeable high-technology sector tend to exhibit stronger and more broadly distributed demand for workplace learning (Räis & Saar, 2017; Wijga et al., 2025). Countries in which these job characteristics are less prevalent risk falling into a low-skill equilibrium trap, in which weak employer investment in training and limited individual incentives to upskill mutually reinforce one another, sustaining persistently low participation and reproducing low-skill trajectories across the population (Desjardins, 2017). In such contexts, demand-side policies face

the additional challenge that the structural conditions generating learning demand are themselves absent or weak.

The second driver is life-course dynamics. Learning needs and aspirations are not static; they evolve as adults move through biographical transitions – entering or leaving the labour market, relocating, forming or dissolving households, becoming caregivers, or approaching retirement. Each transition introduces new roles, responsibilities, and functional requirements that can generate new learning intentions (Brink, 2023). The policy implication is significant: ALS that are adapted only to the needs of working-age employed adults will systematically underserve those at transitional life-course moments whose learning needs may be acute but whose connection to employment-related provision is weakened.

The third driver is the growing complexity of everyday life. The expansion of digital public services, e-government platforms, or digital banking, to name a few examples, creates functional capability gaps among adults who lack the digital literacy to navigate these systems effectively. Similarly, increasing complexity in health information environments, legal frameworks, and civic procedures raises the stakes of functional competence, generating new learning demands beyond the workplace (Grotlüschen & Heilmann, 2021). This complexity is not merely administrative or technological, but also about deeper questions of whose knowledge matters (epistemic) and how people are included as members of society, not just workers (civic). Adults, including older ones, are now required to interpret large volumes of information, distinguish reliable evidence from misinformation and fake news, understand the implications of AI-produced content, and exercise judgment in fast-moving digital environments (Newport, 2021; Milana et al., 2024). For this reason, adult learning must also be understood as a democratic imperative encompassing civic education, media and information literacy.

2.1.2 Collective Demand and Its Governance Implications

A conceptually and politically crucial feature of demand in ALS is that it is not articulated solely by individuals. Collective actors (e.g., employers, trade unions, sectoral associations, professional bodies, NGOs, and community organisations) shape, amplify, or suppress particular forms of learning demand within governance arenas (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; UNESCO, 2021; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025). Each of these actors advances distinct learning priorities that reflect its institutional interests and constituency, and these priorities may be only partially aligned with the learning needs of the broader adult population.

This has significant implications for how demand is translated into policy. Where employer organisations have a powerful dominant voice in adult learning governance, demand-side policy tends to converge on continuous vocational education and training (CVET) and job-specific skills training, often at the expense of foundational literacy and numeracy, civic education, and other forms of provision with lower immediate returns to firms (Erola et al., 2023). Where trade unions have a relatively strong role in governance, demand articulation tends to include workers' stakes, encompassing career development, health and safety training, and in some traditions, broader educational entitlements. Where civil society organisations are active in governance, learning demands linked to social inclusion, community development, and democratic participation are more likely to reach the policy agenda.

The composition and relative influence of stakeholders within a given governance architecture, therefore, function as a potential filter on demand: they determine which learning needs are heard, which are amplified into policy, and which remain latent or neglected.

2.2 Supply of Adult Learning

Organised adult learning provision is institutionally segmented into four clusters, each anchored in distinct governance logics and stakeholder groups (Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025). These clusters are not simply administrative labels. They are historically developed structures that shape what learning is available, to whom, on what terms, and with what forms of recognition. As a result, any serious account of supply-side variation in ALS needs to map these clusters and, crucially, examine how they

interlock, whether as complements, substitutes, or recurrent points of tension, across national contexts.

2.2.1 The Formal Education Cluster

The first cluster comprises adult learning embedded in the regulated education system and, as a result, closely tied to the state apparatus, legally recognised standards, and explicit statutory frameworks. Its institutional logic is credentialing: learning yields formally recognised outcomes with portable value in labour markets and social life. In adult learning, this most often takes the form of CVET and second-chance routes to basic, secondary, and tertiary education for adults whose initial schooling was incomplete, or as part of reskilling pathways. Governance here is typically public and state-led, though degrees of marketisation vary sharply. Some countries sustain broadly publicly funded systems with strong regulatory oversight; others rely more heavily on private providers operating within publicly defined rules (Popovič et al., 2021; Kalenda & Desjardins, 2025).

2.2.2 The Welfare Policy Cluster

The second cluster situates adult learning within welfare-regime institutions, particularly social investment strategies and active labour market policies (ALMPs). Consequently, responsibility for overseeing this cluster most often lies with Ministries of Welfare or of Employment. Its institutional logic is redistributive and preventive: learning is framed as a policy instrument to mitigate or tackle social risks, inequality, and the inclusion of groups at risk of labour-market marginalisation (Hemerijck, 2018). Provision typically takes the form of targeted courses and programmes for unemployed people, low-skilled workers, and other disadvantaged groups.

The scale and institutional maturity of this cluster depend heavily on the fiscal and administrative capacity of the welfare state. Early and robust social-investment adopters tend to sustain more extensive publicly funded training schemes and more established coordination with education and labour-market institutions (Bonoli, 2007). Fiscally constrained contexts, by contrast, often display thinner provision and weaker integration. One analytically important distinction concerns outputs: ALMP training that leads to formally recognised qualifications typically demands closer coordination with formal education institutions and is therefore more likely to produce durable effects (OECD, 2026fc). This has prompted a growing number of countries to strengthen cooperation between formal adult education and the provision of learning with welfare-oriented aims (Bonoli et al., 2025). Yet this closer alignment also carries risks; strong links to formal adult education can create new barriers to access when credentialling procedures are governed by an overly rigid application of qualification frameworks (ETF, 2026 forthcoming).

2.2.3 The Labour Market Cluster

The third cluster embeds adult learning in the labour market, firm training strategies, and the institutional architecture of employment relations, including employers and their organisations, unions, and sectoral organisations. These relations constitute a distinct domain of adult learning with its own approaches to the governance of provision, prioritisation of training, and its financing (Hefler & Markowitsch, 2008). Its institutional logic is typically instrumental: learning is organised around employer skill needs and the production requirements of the economy (Erola et al., 2023; Hornberg et al., 2024). It can also be motivated by skills shortages (ETF, 2020). This makes it a core arena for workplace and job-related learning, but also one that is highly sensitive to occupational structure, job task complexity and autonomy, labour demand, and the initial skill composition of the workforce.

Countries with larger shares of high-skill employment, especially in complex services and high-technology sectors, alongside greater relevance of larger firms, stronger integration into international value chains, and high rates of labour-force utilisation, tend to sustain more extensive workplace training opportunities. Where employment attachment is weaker, provision narrows, and its benefits concentrate among those already well positioned (Boeren, 2016; Räis & Saar, 2017; Desjardins, 2020;

Wijga et al., 2025). Provision in this cluster is strongly shaped by industrial relations: where union density, collective bargaining coverage, and employment protection are relatively high, social partners have more opportunities to negotiate more stable and broadly accessible training arrangements and be more involved in the training process itself (Cabus et al., 2020; Iannidou & Parma, 2022). Where these institutions are weaker, provision is more fragmented, firm-specific, and stratified – with predictable inequalities by occupation, contract type, and firm size.

The progressive utilisation of AI in work processes is introducing new dynamics in labour market-led training. At the time this paper is written, it can be observed that AI may lead to a reduction in training provision in areas where human labour is progressively replaced by automation. While it is early to draw conclusions, it is reasonable to expect that the governance of labour market training will be subject to negotiations and redesign.

2.2.4 The Civil Society Cluster

The fourth cluster captures adult learning rooted in the civic sphere: community organisations, voluntary associations, NGOs, and forms of learning oriented towards personal development, cultural participation, and democratic life. Its institutional logic is civic and humanistic rather than credentialling or labour-market integration. Learning is valued for its intrinsic contribution to individual flourishing, social cohesion, and democratic participation. This cluster is often undervalued in system-level accounts that privilege welfare and labour-market logics, although it can both respond to non-job-related learning demands and actively cultivate them (UNESCO, 2021; Belete et al., 2022; ETF, 2024). Also, it is crucial to reach and potentially engage adult learners in vulnerable positions for them to express the demand for this type of learning (Broek et al., 2023).

In several national traditions, this cluster has been historically significant and institutionally durable. The German *Volkshochschulen*, the Scandinavian folk high school and study-circle movements (Nylander & Rubenson, 2025a) and the Bulgarian tradition of community learning centres – “chitalishta” (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2025) illustrate how civil society provision can achieve scale, public legitimacy, and long-term stability. Governance and funding, however, are highly variable. In some contexts, adult civil society learning receives direct public support and oversight, often through ministries responsible for culture, citizenship, or social affairs, and is treated as a public good alongside formal education. Elsewhere, it is politically marginal and chronically underfunded (Popovič et al., 2021).

2.2.5 Clusters in Interaction

These four clusters do not operate as sealed compartments. Their boundaries are permeable and overlapping, and their relationships vary systematically across national contexts. A strong civil society cluster may partially compensate for weak welfare provision in countries with limited ALMP infrastructure. A highly marketised formal education cluster may weaken or displace labour-market training by creating too many alternative credentials of uneven value. Conversely, tightly coordinated vocational systems, where formal education institutions, employers, and social partners share governance responsibilities, tend to produce more coherent and equitable supply architectures than systems in which clusters evolve in institutional silos (Kalenda & Desjardins, 2025). For the governance analysis that follows, these interactions are not secondary. The opportunity structure for adult participation in organised learning is not the simple sum of four parallel subsystems; it is the product of how those subsystems interact with one another.

2.3 Coordination of Adult Learning Supply and Demand

Coordination refers to the mechanisms that align actors, institutions, and policy instruments to connect demand with provision, manage conflicts over priorities and resources, and sustain coherent learning pathways (OECD, 2026fc; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2026fc). In ALS, coordination is inherently difficult

because analytically three types of coordination exist – each operating on a different level: (1) macro-level, (2) meso-level, and (3) micro-level.

2.3.1 Macro-level Coordination

At the macro level, coordination can align policy frameworks, legislation, and funding across ministries and tiers of government. Without explicit mechanisms, actors often pursue parallel or conflicting agendas, producing duplication in some areas and gaps in others. Countries adopt three ideal-typical, macro-level coordination models, understood as simplified analytical constructs used for comparison (Thelen, 2004; Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Desjardins, 2017; Desjardins & Kalenda, 2025). *State-led model,* which centralises authority and resources in a lead ministry or coordinating body, typically supported by legislation that sets entitlements, standards, and responsibilities. *The market-led model,* which decentralises coordination to learners, employers, and providers. While potentially responsive to local demand, it often leads to fragmentation and unequal access because individuals' navigation depends only on their resources and agency. *Stakeholder-led systems*, where coordination is institutionalised through tripartite or multi-stakeholder bodies (e.g., sectoral councils, training boards, collective agreements), with effectiveness depending on the capacity and representativeness of social partners.

2.3.2 Meso-level Coordination

At the meso level, coordination aligns actors within sectors, occupations, or regions/cities – where learning needs (demand), provider networks (supply), and financing are negotiated. Mechanisms typically include sectoral councils, training boards, and multi-stakeholder platforms. Where unions are embedded, coordination is more likely to incorporate worker interests and equity concerns (e.g., access for lower-skilled workers, older adults, and those in non-standard employment). Where employers have a strong position in the system, coordination tends to focus on immediate productivity and firm-specific needs, with weaker attention to entitlements and transferable competences (Erola et al., 2023). The configuration of meso level governance has structural consequences: excluding civil society, community providers, or marginalised learner representatives narrows both the definition of legitimate demand and the purposes adult learning is expected to serve. It can also potentially weaken the system's responsiveness to local need, since actors closest to shifting labour-market conditions, community constraints, and learners' lived circumstances are often best placed to identify emerging demand, participation barriers, and forms of provision that are locally credible. Inclusive meso-level coordination therefore requires institutional design that creates a durable space for these voices, including those least able to self-organise.

2.3.3 Micro-level Coordination

At the micro level, coordination connects individuals to relevant learning opportunities. Even with strong macro- and meso-level arrangements, adults face navigation challenges: identifying relevant options and assessing their quality, understanding entry conditions, balancing learning with work and family, and assembling learning pathways over time to adapt to changing needs, opportunities, and constraints or to demonstrate acquired skills and competences (OECD, 2023). Outreach and guidance services should address this through information and advisory support, but coordination at this level varies across organisations e.g., public employment services, education institutions, independent career services, and third-sector actors. The quality of provision and access to such services remain a central equity concern.

2.4 Outcomes of Adult Learning

Outcomes are the results of adult learning, capturing both what individuals gain and how those gains translate into wider social, economic, and civic effects. They matter because they provide a basis for

assessing system performance and tracing how, over time, policy priorities steer provision and shape the system's overall character. A useful distinction is between proximal and distal outcomes (OECD, 2026fc).

Proximal outcomes are the immediate and observable results of engagement in organised learning. The most basic is participation: the share of adults taking part in formal or non-formal learning. Participation is widely tracked, but it is a blunt indicator, since it says little about quality, intensity, or equity (Boeren, 2016; Boeren & Kalenda, 2025). A second proximal outcome is learning gains: skills, competencies, and knowledge that translate into personal development and capabilities of individuals acquired through participation (OECD, 2019, 2024; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021).

Distal outcomes are longer-term and more diffuse effects on individuals and society. They extend beyond skill acquisition to outcomes such as employment and earnings, health, social participation, and democratic engagement. Economic outcomes (e.g., employability, productivity, earnings, and occupational mobility) have historically dominated policy and evaluation, particularly where adult learning is governed through labour-market and economic development institutions (Rubenson, 2018). These effects are comparatively measurable: adult learning is associated with higher employment, shorter unemployment spells, and wage gains, especially for lower-skilled adults (Denzler et al., 2025).

Non-economic outcomes are no less consequential but are less consistently prioritised. Health outcomes include improved health literacy and behaviours, alongside indirect benefits linked to income, social integration, and reduced stress (Elias et al., 2002). Adult learning is associated with better self-reported health and a stronger capacity to navigate health systems, especially among older adults and those with lower initial education (Schuller et al., 2004; Brink, 2023). Social outcomes include trust, cohesion, civic norms, and community participation; learning in collective or community settings can strengthen networks and reduce isolation (Schuller & Watson, 2009). Traditions of liberal and civil-society adult education foreground these outcomes, but they become secondary when funding and steering are narrowly aligned with labour-market returns (Hodge et al., 2025; Milana et al., 2025).

What governments' privilege in funding, targets, and performance measurement significantly contributes to reshaping adult learning systems (OECD, 2026fc). When success is defined primarily in labour-market terms, resources tend to concentrate on CVET, employer-led provision (workplace learning), and programmes with quick economic pay-offs. Provision focused on foundational skills, civic education, personal development, or community learning becomes harder to sustain – not necessarily because demand is weak, but because it does not fit the governing outcome logic.

This dynamic is not ideologically neutral. It reflects normative choices about the purposes of adult learning, whose needs are recognised, and which merit public investment (Desjardins, 2017). Systems centred on economic outcomes can reproduce inequality. Sustaining a wider outcome portfolio (e.g., health, inclusion, democratic participation) aimed at widening people's capabilities and substantive freedoms typically requires governance arrangements that institutionalise plural stakeholder voices and resist reducing adult learning to narrow economic instrumentalism.

Analytically, outcomes are not only end results to be explained; they are part of governance itself. How outcomes are defined, measured, and valued feeds back into coordination mechanisms, resource allocation across types of provision, and the shaping of demand through incentives and cultural framing. Outcomes, in this sense, are not a mere product of systems; they repeatedly reorganise systems by shaping new policy priorities that are translated into instruments and programmes, and then become built into institutional practice.

3. ADULT LEARNING GOVERNANCE

Public governance of adult learning represents a key enabler that can reshape the local characteristics of ALS, thereby expanding opportunities for learning. In this regard, governance refers to the institutions, rules, and processes through which ALS are steered, resourced, and shaped. It includes the formal architecture of laws, strategies, and financing mechanisms, as well as the institutional arrangements that translate policy intent into practice. In this sense, governance is what can bring dispersed elements of ALS (i.e., diverse supply clusters, heterogeneous demand, and often fragmented coordination mechanisms) into a more coherent configuration, capable of creating an enabling environment for more equitable and effective learning outcomes that would not be possible otherwise.

System-level policymaking in adult learning, therefore, entails building and continually strengthening public governance of ALS. A foundational step is to make adult learning a legible object of policy: something that can be named, delineated, measured, and coordinated across institutional boundaries. In many countries, adult learning remains institutionally invisible, subsumed under schooling, dispersed across labour-market activation and social policy, or treated as a residual category without dedicated governance infrastructure (DVV International, 2020; ETF, 2022; Hinzen & Baratov, 2025). Making adult learning governable requires establishing it as a recognised policy domain with identifiable boundaries, designated authorities, and earmarked and stable resources.

This system perspective is intentionally non-normative, in that it seeks to describe and analyse how arrangements function and interact, rather than to prescribe particular models or outcomes. It does not presume that any one governance model is inherently superior, nor does it suggest that a single institutional template or a fixed set of governance “building blocks” can be straightforwardly transplanted across differing socio-economic and cultural contexts. ALS are always the products of historically formed processes, strongly shaped by local conditions (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Kalenda, 2024). Rather, the system perspective offers an analytical lens for describing how governance is assembled in different national settings, and for identifying characteristic tensions that emerge when coordination is fragmented, responsibilities are dispersed, or policy priorities are misaligned with available resources. What works in a high-capacity welfare state with robust social partnership institutions, i.e., in the “Nordic model” of ALS (Nylander & Rubenson, 2025b), may be neither feasible nor desirable in settings with weaker state capacity, lower union density, or different normative commitments about the role of the state in adult learning.

3.1 Enabling conditions for adult learning

The following subsections set out four foundational pillars of ALS governance: (1) legal frameworks, (2) strategic planning, (3) institutional elements, and (4) financing mechanisms (DVV International, 2020; ETF, 2025; Hinzen & Baratov, 2025). Together, these pillars create *enabling conditions* for adult learning and can shape system dynamics in ways that are specific to each national context. Legal provisions establish the enabling environment. Strategic planning sets priorities and allocates attention across demand, supply, and coordination. Financing mechanisms translate priorities into feasible operations. Institutional arrangements, especially implementation capacity and supporting policy tools, determine whether intended outcomes can be delivered in practice.

3.1.1 The Legal Framework

The legal framework layer establishes the formal basis for adult learning as a recognised policy domain and specifies the rights, responsibilities, and institutional architecture through which the system operates. Legal provisions do not, in themselves, create functional systems. However, their

absence or incoherence constrains what can be governed. Strong legal frameworks make adult learning visible and enforceable (Hinzen & Baratov, 2025).

Key characteristics of a coherent legal framework for adult learning include the following. First, a formal definition of adult learning and its recognition as part of the right to lifelong learning (Benavot et al., 2022; ICAE, 2022). This may appear procedural, but it has substantive implications: without a legal definition, adult learning lacks a clear boundary, making it difficult to determine who is responsible for provision, who is entitled to participate, and what constitutes a legitimate public investment.

Second, coherent legislation that either consolidates adult learning within a single framework law or aligns sectoral legislation to minimise contradictions and gaps. In practice, adult learning governance is inherently multi-sectoral (Popovič et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022), but multi-sectorality does not require fragmented legal provisions. Framework laws can establish overarching principles, definitions, and coordination requirements while leaving operational detail to sector-specific regulation. The critical feature is clarity about roles and responsibilities: which ministry or agency is accountable for the system as a whole, which actors have authority over particular functions or target groups, and how jurisdictional conflicts are to be resolved (DVV International, 2020).

Third, formal recognition of the institutional and functional diversity of adult learning (Dohmen & Yelubayeva, 2018; OECD, 2026fc). This includes recognising formal, non-formal, and informal learning; acknowledging both job-related and non-job-related purposes; and establishing the legitimacy of diverse provider types – public institutions, private training firms, employer-based programmes, and civil society organisations. Legal frameworks that privilege formal qualifications while marginalising non-formal or community-based provision effectively narrow the system's scope and exclude forms of learning that may be central to particular populations or social purposes (OECD, 2023).

Fourth, a legally embedded description of qualifications, together with a clear legal basis for the recognition of prior learning, should set standards, institutional roles, as well as proportionate quality assurance arrangements. Recognition of prior learning is critical for adults whose learning has occurred outside formal education settings, but it requires legal grounding to function at scale (OECD, 2023). That foundation should also articulate standards for service provision (e.g., through accreditation of adult learning providers or the certification of adult learning educators). The aim, however, should be to safeguard trust and transparency without over-formalising provision or creating barriers to access.

Finally, provisions that clarify multi-level governance and minimise overlapping or conflicting mandates between national, regional, and local authorities. In decentralised or federal governance systems, ambiguity about which tier of government holds responsibility for adult learning can paralyse coordination and generate territorial inequalities (Desjardins, 2017). Legal clarity does not eliminate intergovernmental negotiation, but it provides a baseline framework within which those negotiations occur.

Common pitfalls include fragmented rules scattered across education, labour market, and social legislation with no integrating instrument; qualifications frameworks that exist largely on paper without implementing regulations, quality assurance, or employer recognition; and persistent ambiguity about which ministry or agency is accountable for adult learning overall or for specific target groups.

Table 1. Legal layer enablers

Key enabler	Core function
Formal legal definition of adult learning	Establishes the domain and its boundaries
Coherent legislative architecture	Aligns rules across sectors and sets policy goals
Clear institutional accountability	Assigns responsibility and authority
Recognition of diverse types of adult learning and purposes	Broadens legitimate provision and participation
Recognition of diverse provider types	Supports system pluralism and inclusion
Legal basis for qualifications and recognition of prior learning	Validates learning beyond formal settings
Legal basis for quality assurance	Sets transparency of and trust in provision
Clear multi-level governance rules	Reduces conflict across tiers of government

Source: author and ETF

3.1.2 Strategic Planning

Strategic planning acts as the “translation belt” between law and delivery: it converts legal provisions and broad political intent into a prioritised, resourced, and implementable agenda. It is at this level that normative commitments about what adult learning is *for* (e.g., economic competitiveness, social inclusion, civic engagement, etc.) are made explicit. Strategic planning is also where trade-offs between these purposes and between adult learning and neighbouring policy fields are negotiated and institutionalised through goals, targets, funding allocations, and governance arrangements. Because governments must routinely choose among competing priorities not only within adult learning but also in adjacent domains, such as higher education, youth vocational training, or welfare state reconstruction, these cross-sector decisions typically shape national adult learning strategies and can affect the extent to which adult learning is prioritised within national strategies (Kalenda, 2024).

A comprehensive adult learning strategy can be distinguished by several recurring features. It typically situates adult learning within a broader lifelong learning framework, recognising that adult learning is often shaped by its relationship to initial education, youth transitions, or the broader architecture of skill formation (OECD, 2026fc). As a result, in the presence of several strategies, adult learning framework can be used to align them. Furthermore, it is usually grounded in evidence about the drivers and constraints shaping participation and outcomes in the national context (Sekmokas et al., 2024), rather than relying on aspirational rhetoric or imported models that are institutionally misaligned. It also tends to set measurable targets for participation, equity, and outcomes, thereby enabling monitoring and accountability (ETF, 2022).

To realise the full potential of adult learning, effective strategies more often make explicit how it advances multiple policy objectives (e.g., economic competitiveness, social cohesion, active citizenship, etc.) rather than elevating one goal at the expense of others. This pluralism is not merely rhetorical: it acknowledges both the institutional diversity of provision and the heterogeneity of demand and helps to justify investment across multiple clusters instead of concentrating resources narrowly on labour-market training (Broek et al., 2010; Broek & Buiskool, 2012). At the same time, such balance might reduce the tendency towards excessive centralisation and the exclusion of local/regional partners. As Grotlüschen et al. (2023) caution, overarching adult learning strategies often fail to account for local activists and groups, even though they can mobilise quickly and flexibly in response to emerging local issues.

Strategic planning also tends to integrate supportive policy tools (e.g., quality assurance, guidance systems, and data infrastructure) as capacity-building mechanisms rather than treating them solely as compliance instruments (Broek et al., 2010; Broek & Buiskool, 2012).

Finally, effective strategies are often associated with a long-term view (Benavot et al., 2022), with a greater emphasis on stability and incremental refinement over frequent, abrupt shifts. Comparative evidence across fifteen countries suggests that those maintaining greater continuity in adult learning policy since the 1990s have achieved stronger outcomes – both in overall adult participation and in the equity of that participation (Kalenda & Desjardins, 2025).

Common pitfalls include strategies without credible implementation plans, timelines, or resource commitments. The experience of EU Member States offers a cautionary example: in several Central European countries, adoption of EU lifelong learning frameworks occurred largely at a discursive level, with limited implementation (Kalenda, 2024). In these cases, Europeanisation reflected domestic adaptation and rhetorical alignment more than substantive policy change (Milana et al., 2020). Additional pitfalls include overlapping strategies spanning education, employment, and social inclusion, as well as frequent political shifts that impede the accumulation of long-term effects (Kalenda & Desjardins, 2025).

Table 2. Strategic layer enablers

Key enabler	Core function
Integration within a lifelong learning strategy	Positions adult learning within the wider education, skills, and transition system
Evidence-based strategic design	Grounds priorities in national participation patterns and creation of learning opportunities
Measurable goals and targets	Enables monitoring, accountability, and policy adjustment
Balanced multi-purpose orientation	Aligns adult learning with economic, social, and civic objectives
Recognition of diverse demand and provision	Justifies investment across varied learner groups, purposes, and provider types
Inclusion of local and regional actors	Increases responsiveness to emerging needs and avoids over-centralised strategy design
Credible implementation architecture	Links strategy to timelines, governance arrangements, and resource commitments
Cross-sector coordination	Reduces overlap and increases alignment across education, employment, and social inclusion strategies
Long-term focus	Supports stability and cumulative improvement over time

Source: author and ETF

3.1.3 Institutional Arrangements for Implementation

Even well-designed legal and strategic frameworks do not automatically translate into practice. The literature often points to the importance of implementation and capacity that can bridge the gap between policy design and practice (Hinzen & Baratov, 2025). Institutional arrangements are central in this respect, as they illustrate whether governance operates in reality or remains confined to formal documents. Three dimensions are particularly critical.

First, the institutional architecture for policy delivery. This includes policy steering through a body or bodies that ensure coherence and monitor progress. Besides, operational roles for ministries, agencies, public employment services, municipalities, employers, and non-state actors need to be

clear across the system. Role clarity does not necessarily imply centralisation, but it does affect whether responsibilities, resource controls, and accountability relations are fit-for-purpose, duplications are avoided and subsidiarity considered. Institutional architecture often includes mechanisms that align national frameworks with regional and local implementation, such as territorial partnership structures bringing together public authorities, social partners, and civil society organisations, which play a vital role in ALS (UNESCO, 2021; Benavot et al., 2022). These mechanisms operationalise the meso-level coordination arrangements (see 3.3.2).

Second, data and monitoring systems. Governance capacity is closely related to whether systems can identify target populations, track participation and completion across organised adult learning, and link participation to labour-market and social outcomes (Grotlüschen et al., 2023; Sekmokas et al., 2024; OECD, 20206fc). This is institutionally demanding, as it often depends on information systems that span supply clusters (formal education, welfare policy, labour market provision, and civil society) and can track individuals across programmes and over time. In fragmented systems, data collection is often siloed within ministries or agencies, making system-level assessment impossible (Desjardins & Kalenda, 2026fc).

Third, quality assurance and improvement. Quality assurance is a crucial aspect of adult learning provision, but it is often framed as a compliance function, while it might operate as a developmental mechanism that helps providers improve relevance and effectiveness. This tends to depend on whether standards and processes are proportionate to the capacity of different provider types, feedback loops that connect provision to programme redesign, and resources that support improvement rather than simply auditing performance (Broek, 2010; Broek & Buiskool, 2012).

Institutional arrangements are where governance becomes tangible. Common weaknesses include unclear operational roles that leave key functions unaligned or duplicated (Desjardins, 2017); fragmented data systems that prevent system-level monitoring (Grotlüschen et al., 2023; Sekmokas et al., 2024; OECD, 2026fc); and quality assurance regimes that operate as gatekeeping rather than as support for institutional development.

Table 3. Institutional arrangements layer enablers

Key enabler	Core function
Steering	Establishes body or bodies, if any, to ensure coherent communication, monitor progress and formulate recommendations based on feedback from implementation. Steering bodies' roles can vary from decision-making, to advisory or consultation.
Clear operational roles and responsibilities	Defines who does what across ministries, agencies, municipalities, providers, and non-state actors such as social partners and civil society organisations.
Implementation-focused institutional architecture	Translates legal and strategic commitments into operational tasks
Alignment across governance levels	Connects national frameworks with regional and local implementation and defines degrees of autonomy. Defines relationship between central and decentralised responsibilities according to a subsidiarity principle.
Territorial and partnership-based coordination mechanisms	Brings together public authorities, social partners, and civil society to support meso-level coordination
Integrated data and monitoring systems	Identifies target groups, tracks participation and completion, and supports system-level assessment. It develops anticipatory and foresight capacity, for future preparedness
Cross-sector data connectivity	Links information across education, labour market, welfare, and civil society provision

Key enabler	Core function
Capacity to track outcomes over time	Connects participation to labour-market and social outcomes for learning and accountability
Developmental quality assurance	Uses quality assurance to improve relevance and effectiveness, not just enforce compliance
Supportive policy tools as capacity infrastructure	Embeds quality assurance, guidance, and data systems as enabling mechanisms for delivery
Provider-proportionate standards and processes	Adapts quality requirements to the capacities and roles of different provider types
Feedback loops for continuous improvement	Links monitoring and provider experience, and anticipatory/foresight analyses to system redesign and institutional learning

Source: author and ETF

3.1.4 Financing Mechanisms

Financing mechanisms determine which parts of the governance architecture function in practice and at what scale. Legal frameworks, strategies, and institutional design cannot compensate for chronic under-resourcing or poorly aligned funding incentives (Benavot et al., 2022).

ALS that achieve both high participation and equity typically rest on diversified funding streams, including substantial public investment in measures targeted at vulnerable adults. Crucially, these investments are aligned across demand-side measures, supply-side provision, and system-level coordination, and are directed towards the most pressing needs within the country's ALS. Depending on national priorities and institutional capacity, this support can take the form of a range of financial instruments, including national skills funds, levy-grant schemes, individual learning accounts, training vouchers, co-financing arrangements for employers, targeted subsidies for disadvantaged learners, tax incentives for participation and others.

Advanced financing begins with sustainable, multi-source funding, even though in most countries the principal contributors to adult learning are not governments but private-sector actors (Popovič et al., 2021). To cover the full scope of adult learning, financing mechanisms therefore typically need to combine public budgets at the central and regional levels, employers' contributions, and individual investment (OECD, 2019). No single source is sufficient. Public funding guarantees access and equity, employer contributions align provision with labour-market needs, and individual investment can strengthen commitment and completion.

Strategic allocation is equally important. Financing should cover coordination functions, guidance services, data systems, stakeholder and partnership structures, as well as supply-side investment in providers, programme development, innovation, and quality assurance, and demand-side measures such as entitlements, training-leave compensation, employer incentives, and public awareness campaigns. This is especially vital in the area of non-job-related adult learning within the civic cluster, which tends to be underfunded across most countries (EAEA, 2018; Duke et al., 2021). ALS that concentrate resources exclusively on supply, for example, subsidising provider infrastructure while neglecting financial, time, and informational barriers faced by learners, will struggle to reach disadvantaged populations (OECD, 2023).

Financing should also be equity-sensitive. This implies higher subsidies or full public funding for low-skilled adults and other disadvantaged groups whose participation is most sensitive to costs and whose expected private returns are often lowest. It also means avoiding simplistic performance funding models that reward providers primarily for volume or completion, as these can create incentives to recruit easier-to-reach learners, thereby reinforcing inequalities (Desjardins, 2017).

Common pitfalls include heavy reliance on short-term project or donor funding, which produces unstable provision and weak institutionalisation (Duke et al., 2021); a supply-side bias with limited investment in demand-side barriers and coordination functions (OECD, 2023); fragmented financing spread across multiple budget lines with weak oversight of total investment and limited alignment with strategic priorities; and chronic underinvestment in "intangible" but critical functions such as outreach, guidance, data infrastructure, evaluation, and inter-institutional coordination (Grotlüschen et al., 2023; Sekmokas et al., 2024). A further, politically sensitive pitfall is the lack of transparency in resource allocation. In some contexts, opacity in financing has enabled corruption-driven inequalities, with resources captured by well-connected providers or intermediaries rather than reaching intended beneficiaries. Countries with higher corruption indices tend to have lower participation in adult learning and greater inequality in access to adult learning for women and lower-skilled adults (Gerganov et al., 2021). Transparency is therefore not merely an administrative virtue but a governance precondition for equity in access to adult learning.

Table 4. Financing layer enablers

Key enabler	Core function
Sustainable, multi-source funding	Combines public, employer, and individual contributions to support the full scope of adult learning and attainment of policy goals
Substantial public investment in equity	Underwrites access for vulnerable and low-skilled adults whose participation is most sensitive to cost
Alignment of funding across the system	Connects demand-side measures, supply-side provision, and system-level coordination to strategic priorities
Strategic allocation of resources	Directs funding towards the most pressing national needs and the functions most critical to system performance
Financing of coordination and system infrastructure	Supports guidance, data systems, stakeholder councils, outreach, evaluation, and inter-institutional coordination
Balanced support for supply and demand	Funds providers and programme quality, while also reducing financial, time, and informational barriers for learners
Support for underfunded learning purposes	Ensures investment also reaches non-job-related and civic forms of adult learning
Incentive-compatible funding models	Avoids performance systems that reward easy-to-reach learners and instead supports inclusive provision
Transparency and oversight in allocation	Makes resource distribution visible, limits capture and corruption, and strengthens equity and accountability
Stability beyond short-term projects	Reduces dependence on temporary project or donor funding and supports long-term institutionalisation

Source: author and ETF

3.1.5 Governance as System Architecture

These four pillars (legal frameworks, strategic planning, institutional arrangements, and financing) constitute the load-bearing architecture of ALS governance. Each is necessary but insufficient on its own. Legal provisions without strategic direction remain latent. Strategies without financing are aspirational. Financing without implementation and monitoring capacity is wasteful. Institutional arrangements without legal grounding and strategic coherence tend to fragment and drift.

Effective governance requires that these pillars are not only individually robust but also mutually aligned and adjusted as the system evolves. This is the central governance task: building an

architecture that is coherent enough to function as a system, flexible enough to adapt to changing economic and social conditions, and inclusive enough to serve the heterogeneous learning needs of the adult population. The quality of that architecture ultimately influences whether ALS deliver on their promise of equity, inclusion, and lifelong opportunity, or whether they reproduce the inequalities they are meant to address.

4. QUALITY AND EFFECTIVE ALS

The preceding sections have established what ALS are (Section 2) and how they are governed (Section 3). The remaining question is what differentiates systems that perform well from those that do not. This section addresses that question *by synthesising comparative evidence on the features of quality and effective ALS* from the previous two sections. It proceeds in three steps. First, it defines what is meant by a *quality and effective* ALS and proposes a multi-dimensional outcome profile against which system performance can be assessed. Second, it identifies the structural and governance conditions that comparative research consistently associates with strong and equitable outcomes of ALS. Third, it examines the dynamic properties that enable systems to sustain effectiveness over time.

4.1 Defining quality: A Multi-dimensional Outcome Profile

Defining a quality ALS requires moving beyond single indicators. Participation rates are the most widely used benchmark, and the EU target of 60 per cent of adults engaged in learning annually provides a useful reference point (European Commission, 2024). Yet participation alone conflates volume with equity and reveals little about what learning delivers. A quality ALS is better captured through three interrelated outcome dimensions: scope, equity, and capability development.

Scope refers to broad, high participation across the adult life course and across the four supply clusters (formal education, welfare-state provision, workplace learning, and civil society). Systems in which participation is heavily concentrated in job-related, employer-funded training, while civic, foundational, and community learning remain marginal, *limit the broader social outcomes* of adult learning in contemporary societies (Brink, 2023; Milana et al., 2025).

Equity concerns the distribution of learning opportunities across social groups. In quality and effective ALS, the participation gap between higher- and lower-educated adults is narrower; gender- and migration-related *gaps are addressed through targeted provision*; and regional disparities in access are limited through deliberate policy design. Equity also encompasses the quality and relevance of learning received, not only the opportunity to participate.

Capability development refers to the extent to which participation translates into *durable skills and competences that empower individuals*, and to whether those gains support economic, civic, and social functioning (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021). Both proximal outcomes (e.g., literacy and numeracy gains) and distal outcomes (e.g., employment quality, health, and civic participation) should be tracked. A system that generates high participation but weak learning gains, or that improves employment outcomes while leaving foundational skill deficits unaddressed, falls short of the standard of quality proposed here.

4.2 Structural and Governance Conditions for Effectiveness

Comparative research identifies a recurring configuration of structural and governance features that differentiates countries whose ALS more closely align with definitions of quality and effectiveness (Broek, 2010; Broek & Buiskool, 2012; Broek et al., 2023; Kalenda & Desjardins, 2025; OECD, 2026fc). These are not discrete ‘best practices’ but an interconnected configuration: system outcomes depend on how the elements reinforce one another. Table 5 provides an overview of the key governance conditions that support effective, high-quality ALS.

Table 5. Enablers of High-Quality and Effective ALS

Key Enabler	Core function
Mutually reinforcing legal, strategic, financial, and institutional pillars	Strong overall system performance
Adequate provision across all four supply clusters	Inclusive participation
Combined supply-, demand-, and coordination-side investment	Equity in access
Clear institutional roles and monitoring capacity	Effective implementation
Inclusive meso-level governance with civil society and social partner voice	Broad responsiveness to learner needs
Governance that values both economic and non-economic objectives, and is capable of anticipating and being prepared (i.e., both anticipation and resilience)	Durable support for multiple learning purposes

Source: author

4.3 Dynamic Properties: Sustaining Effectiveness over Time

System quality is not a static achievement. It depends on governance conditions that allow ALS to adapt, accumulate capacity, and withstand regressive pressures. Comparative longitudinal evidence highlights three dynamic properties that distinguish systems capable of sustained performance (Kalenda & Desjardins, 2025).

The first is policy stability with incremental refinement. Countries that have maintained a relatively stable adult learning policy orientation since the 1990s, layering reforms progressively rather than reversing direction with each political cycle, tend to exhibit stronger participation and equity outcomes. Stability enables institutions, providers, and employers to adjust practices and build capacity. It also allows monitoring data to accumulate, enabling evidence-based adjustments. Frequent policy reversals, by contrast, impede institutional learning and erode the trust of both providers and potential learners.

The second is equity by design. High-quality ALS do not rely on open-access provision and the expectation that disadvantaged adults will self-navigate opportunities. Equity objectives are built into legal frameworks, financing mechanisms, and quality assurance, and distributional outcomes are actively monitored. Targeted mechanisms are combined with universal offers: concentrated support for the most disadvantaged complements, rather than replaces, broader provision (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021). Where relevant, corruption-related barriers to equitable resource allocation are addressed through governance transparency (Gerganov et al., 2021).

The third is adaptive governance capacity. Systems that have invested in robust monitoring infrastructure, regular strategic review processes, and mechanisms to incorporate stakeholder feedback into policy adjustments seem to respond effectively to technological disruption, demographic ageing, labour-market restructuring, or migration. Adaptive capacity is not improvised change; it is the result of institutionalised responsiveness, grounded in data and sustained by political commitment to evidence-informed governance (Sekmokas et al., 2024; OECD, 2026fc).

ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALE	Adult Learning and Education
ALMP	Active Labour Market Policies
AL	Adult Learning
ALS	Adult Learning System(s)
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CLA	Classification of Learning Activities
CLC	Community Learning Centres
CVET	Continuing Vocational Education and Training
DVV	Deutscher Volkshochschulverband
EAEA	European Association for the Education of Adults
EC	European Commission
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
QA	Quality Assurance
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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