

Draft Response of the EAEA to the Commission Working Document 'Consultation on the Future 'EU 2020' Strategy'

Introduction

The EAEA is an NGO with 128 members in 42 countries, representing adult learning not only in the European Union, but also in the countries of the Council of Europe. Our members range from local learning centres to large national associations. They represent more than 5000 associations, reaching an estimated 60 million adults each year.

EAEA promotes adult learning of all kinds, but with a particular focus on:

- Increasing participation in learning
- improving access to learning
- targeting currently under-represented groups in society

The EAEA has contributed to the work of the Commission on the current Lisbon Strategy by:-

- Disseminating information about the Lisbon strategy and the subsequent lifelong learning policy papers, including the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning and the Action Plan 'It's never too late to learn', to its members and the NGO Adult Learning sector in the wider Europe.
- Taking an active role in representing the Civil Society Adult Education sector as members of EAC Adult Learning Working Group and focus groups.
- Responding on behalf of the Civil Society Adult Education sector to consultations relating to the Education and Training 2010 objectives.

We therefore welcome this opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Commissions working document on the future strategy and envisage continuing to play an active role in the interface between the Commission and the NGO sector in lifelong learning.

What we like in the working document

The EAEA supports the priorities identified in the paper, including basing growth, opportunity and social cohesion on knowledge and innovation; empowering people in inclusive societies through the acquisition of new skills and the fostering of creativity and innovation; and a more efficient consumption on non-renewable energy and resources to meet environmental goals.

We very much agree with and support the statement that 'Cutting spending in forward-looking areas such as education and research would make this (i.e. achieving the EU 2020 goals) more difficult to achieve.'

Two of the sections make reference to lifelong learning.

These are:

Creating value by basing growth on knowledge

We welcome the importance given to lifelong learning in this section and fully agree with the reference to strengthening education as one of the most effective ways of fighting inequality and poverty. The paper also refers to the high number of low achievers in basic skills and groups that are

vulnerable to exclusion, where education can provide a route into employment and enhance social cohesion.

Empowering people in inclusive societies

This section emphasises the importance of continuing education and training to gain new skills to adapt to changing working patterns and the need for lifelong learning opportunities to be much more accessible. Target groups are identified where employment rates need improving including migrants, those with low levels of education and women.

We are convinced that these statements need to be combined with actions in order to establish sufficient financial conditions for change.

Where we would like to see improvements to the working document

- ***Lifelong learning, adult education and the wider benefits of learning***

We appreciate that lifelong learning has become a focus of the 2020 strategy. We think that the definition and scope of lifelong learning as presented in the document need to be improved.

Today, faced with unresolved, as well as new challenges, education is more important than ever as an empowering tool to release the creative potential of people and communities and as a critical resource that adds to the well-being of our citizens.

Learning and education can provide people with the necessary capabilities, skills and competences to exercise and advance their rights, take control of their destiny, contribute to equity and inclusion, help to end poverty and build equitable, tolerant and sustainable societies.

Learning and education are a valuable investment which brings social benefits by creating more democratic, peaceful, inclusive, productive, healthy and sustainable societies. Significant financial investment is essential to ensure quality provision of learning and education.

Inclusive education is fundamental to the achievement of human, social and economic development. The development of the potential of all citizens contributes significantly to living together in harmony and with dignity.¹

These points illustrate the broad range of adult education and its wider benefits. For the EU 2020 strategy we therefore suggest the following improvements:

We regret that the only sector of education identified in the paper as being in a position to make a contribution to the priorities set out is the University sector. The majority of the population of Europe do not have access to University education, and even if participation rates are increased to 50% of the relevant age group(as is the target in some EU countries), most people in the next ten decades will not gain their knowledge and skills from higher education institutions. While Universities will play an important role in research and innovation, we should recognise and encourage the learning opportunities and creativity realised through the contribution of other education sectors including Adult Education. A whole range of organisations, such as civil society organisations, adult education providers, community learning centres, social partners, should be recognised as key actors in lifelong learning.

¹ Harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future. Belém Framework for Action. UNESCO, 2009.

The need in the next ten years is for policies and programmes that lead to improvements in basic skills and competencies for large sections of the population including the use of ICT; greater adaptability of the work force; increased environmental awareness, more democratic participation; 'active ageing' in ageing societies; better integration of migrants; and social cohesion in a crisis situation. The Adult Education sector can make a contribution to all of these objectives through the provision of formal and non-formal learning opportunities, guidance and programmes tailored to the needs and interests of particular groups and particular localities. This is already happening but it needs a further push and more commitment by the EU and Member States if the learning opportunities are to be extended to larger sections of the EU population.

We especially urge that the proposal for a new phase of the lifelong learning programme (p. 6) not be restricted to young people and that Grundtvig programme be included. Additionally we strongly urge that the existing programmes be extended and new programmes designed in order to meet the needs that have not been met. The new phase of the lifelong learning programme – from 2013 onwards – will also need an increase in its funding, with a special emphasis being put on adult learners.

We also recommend that the potential of non-formal and informal learning should be recognized in the document. The lifelong learning concept should be combined with the life wide learning – this is a European achievement that we cannot give up!

Finally, lifelong learning not only contributes to a more equal, fair and social Europe, it also has a positive impact on economic development and on achieving other priority goals defined in the Strategy;

- ***Lifelong learning and its contribution to democracy and active European citizenship***

The Strategy misses one crucial challenge – the relation and trust between European institutions and its citizens. Participation in European election is at an all time low, and we think that is therefore of utmost urgency that the EU tackles the democratic development of its institutions and its communication with the citizens in the next ten years.

Europe needs to increase its efforts to increase active European citizenship. Adult education should be recognized as a tool to (re-)start a dialogue with Europeans about shared values for the future of our continent. The ambitions of the 2020 strategy will only be achieved with the help of lifelong learning. We cannot build a greener economy with citizens, who are not convinced and unwilling to change their habits. How can this be done without using the instruments developed within the Lifelong Learning community?

Education, transparency and empowering people are important but not only in order to enhance employability. The right to education must be seen not only in the perspective of the needs of the labour market but as a basic democratic right. Education is needed if European citizens are to be encouraged to be active citizens.

Although the Strategy refers to partnerships at one point, we would like to see this concept strengthened even further. Partnerships are crucial for the implementation of European ideas and policies, and as a civil society organisation, we can only underline the important role we can play in connecting the EU institutions and citizens.

Conclusions

The Commission working document is written in preparation for an exit from the financial crisis with the aim of entering a new sustainable social market economy, which is smarter and greener, where we will be more innovative and use resources better. The key input is knowledge and an emphasis is placed on the role of universities to help deliver some of the objectives.

The EAEA would suggest that the key resource is the people of Europe and that learning opportunities, that unleash creativity and innovation, encourage social cohesion and participation, and enable people to be socially, economically and environmentally active should be available to all people who live in the EU, rather than just the wealthier elite.

We would advocate an **adult education initiative across the EU**, involving Member States, Regions, the Social Partners and Civil Society, with leadership provided by the EU in which every individual, beginning with the groups most vulnerable in the financial crisis to social exclusion, be offered the entitlement to gain further learning opportunities. This entitlement should not be restricted to young people, but extended to adults who have had the least learning opportunities in the past.

By investing in Europe's key resource- its people- the next ten years could be a period of sustainable growth, innovation, higher levels of employment and social progress.

EAEA, 13 January 2010