

***Action needs to follow reflection  
Intentions are important but not enough***

Comments on the draft communication from the Commission “Adult Learning: Its is never too late to learn”

Platform Non Formal Adult Education

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***Introduction***

In this brief paper the Platform Non Formal Adult Education comments on the draft communication from the European Commission “Adult Learning: It is never too late to learn” of June 2006.

The Platform is a network organisation and is made up of experts who work in non-formal education (such as national and local training institutions; socio-cultural work, centres for adult education, provincial support bodies, universities, colleges and voluntary organisations).

The organisation is a member of the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)<sup>1</sup>.

The comments are also given on behalf of the Foundation for Folk high schoolwork in the Netherlands. The foundation supports innovative initiatives in the field of adult education based on the ideals of the folk high school movement<sup>2</sup>

Where referral is made in the text to “we”, or “the members” this includes both the Platform and the Foundation.

First we give some overall comments followed by comments and reflections per key message.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information see: <http://www.beraadsgroepvorming.nl/eng.html>

<sup>2</sup> These can be summed up as follows:

- emancipation and self-organisation of economically and socially deprived groups
- the active promotion and support of democratic relations
- getting a grasp on the own world and reality
- learning mutually through exchange and reflection on visions and experiences
- cooperation with respect for differences in belief- and value systems, cultures and social backgrounds

### **Overall Comments**

The communication stands in a growing line of policy documents on the importance of adult learning and education as part of the Lisbon and Copenhagen process. It also reflects the gradual shift in (policy)attention for work- and employment based learning which was prominent in earlier documents on life long learning to a more inclusive view on adult learning and the role it can play in social participation and personal well being.

The platform notes that as a whole the Communication lacks the inspiration and ambition we have seen in earlier documents<sup>3</sup>, but may be it is now time to come to operationalize the inspiration into action. The Communication is a step but it will need to be translated in action plans and programmes, on EU level and on National level.

We welcome the document as a renewed recognition of the value of adult learning in various settings, including the non-formal.

We agree with the recommendations but feel that the actions proposed could be much stronger. Stronger in terms of directives, or at least urgent suggestions to the Member States to develop policies for adult learning and stronger in terms of the actions to be implemented by the European Union.

It is time to develop a strong structure for the further development of adult learning policies, methodologies and provision both on national and European level.

The key messages in the document and the proposed actions are not new.

Most of the action proposed, on the national levels as well as on the level of the EU are already on the way and part of other lines of policy.<sup>4</sup>

The value of the communication is that it may strengthen various actors to go on, or even enlarge their efforts in taking the adult learning agenda forward.

### **Coordination and Coherence**

The Commission makes a plea for a coherent and integrated approach. We agree that coordination is needed at certain levels, however we also agree with the position that variety and diversity in adult learning must be respected, protected and, to stretch the argument, even actively promoted.

We strongly acknowledge that standardised solutions to perceived demand, participation and motivation problems are not effective in all cases. A rich palette of opportunities and possibilities is necessary.

We also acknowledge that the more variations in learning opportunities are possible the more coordination in terms of conditions and exchange of information will be needed. Not to control the variety, but to make it accessible and at the same time not to loose sight of essential common aspects such as quality, recognition of learning outcomes, and participation/motivation strategies.

We strongly feel that diversity and variations must be primarily looked at as constituting a 'rich mosaic' and that policy measures to bring more coherence and

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<sup>3</sup> such as the Memorandum on Lifelong learning which the Beraadsgroep commented on also.

<sup>4</sup> See the EAEA report: Trends and Issues of Adult Learning in Europe, in EAEANews, Special Edition, May 2006

coordination must be geared towards improving the quality of this mosaic instead of towards the creation of unified structures and rules for the whole system.<sup>5</sup> This will need 'open policy frameworks' in which variety can blossom and at the same time public accountability for quality and effectiveness and rational use of public funds can be guaranteed.

#### *Need for national bodies and inter European exchange*

Important in this respect for the Netherlands is the recommendation to establish a national body for adult learning.

Since the late 80-ties such a body, in which all (adult) education and training subsystems that are involved in the "rich mosaic" (which sometimes can also be a 'confusing mélange') of adult learning interact and coordinate approaches, without losing the richness of variety, does not exist anymore<sup>6</sup>.

The Platform strongly endorses the recommendation to establish a national body and suggests the Commission to make this one of the corner stones for inter EU communication on the further development of adult learning policies and systems.

First and foremost this body shall function as a coordination and coherence promoting mechanism between the actors in the field (providers, social partners, learner's interests) on the one hand and as a source for information, promotion and guidance to potential learners on the other hand.

Secondly it must also have a position that it can function as co-maker of adult learning policy both on national level and in European level.

It is important that this body 'covers' the whole field; formal and non-formal, national organised and regional/local organised. Especially the inclusion of lesser formalised actors and organisations who provide adult learning in this national body should be given special attention.

This implies that in principle all member states take on the obligation to establish such a body and give it a national mandate and advisory role in national policy formulation as well as a key role in communication and coordination with the national bodies of other EU member states. On this inter European level the joint national bodies may also act as co-makers of EU policy in the area of adult learning.

We suggest that these bodies form a EU coordination/focus point to facilitate their communication and exchange and fulfil the role as co-maker of policy towards the Commission and the European Parliament

This focus point will also be instrumental in realising the EU action proposal 7 "The Commission will consider setting up and promoting European networks of actors of adult learning to support mutual learning and national developments" (page 12)

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<sup>5</sup> The approach of dealing with diversity as a merely 'confusing mélange' will in the long run lead to uniformity, or at least a rule system that promotes uniformity and as such bring parts of the provision out of reach of important target groups. The use of national qualification frameworks for adult education as rule and financial structures for education policy (as opposed to using these as a lingua franca to refer to learning outcomes) creates this effect as can be seen in the Netherlands as well as in South Africa.

<sup>6</sup> Until the 90-ties the NCVO (national centre for popular education) functioned as such in The Netherlands

The European Association of Education of Adults (EAEA) could be equipped to fulfil this coordination role and act as a focus point for communication between the national bodies.

### ***Investing in Adult Learning***

The Platform fully endorsed the recommendation that additional funding is needed “for adults who have been least well-served by education and training in the past”. (p8)

The key national question for The Netherlands to ask here is of course who is providing this necessary additional funding. In the case of the Netherlands currently funds for various forms of adult learning are widely dispersed and their size is shrinking.

On national level various ministries (Education, Justice, and Culture) have inputs and major inputs are decentralised to the community councils, but this decentralisation is regulated in different legal frameworks (i.a. WMO, BVE, WW). This dispersion leads to a ‘confusing mélange’ and in most cases not to a rich mosaic.

### ***Ensuring Quality***

The need for the three key aspects of education quality, as referred to in the Communication; pedagogy, quality and professional development of staff and quality assurance mechanisms for providers is shared by the members of the platform.

The shift from a teaching supply paradigm to a learner centred paradigm has taken place in the non-formal education sphere over the last 30 years. The “symmetrical pedagogy” taking into account adulthood and life experience is rooted in the theoretical framework of andragogy.<sup>7</sup>

We prefer to speak about andragogy instead of using the term pedagogy, which refers in academic discourse usually to the education/upbringing of children.

We note that in the Netherlands the professional development of staff involved in adult learning/teaching is, in terms of national policies not well taken care of.

There is no coherent provision for initial training of adult educators and where it exists it is mostly for the more formalized aspects of adult basic education, as provided in the framework of courses for (new) migrants.

Systems or structures for further professional development of teachers/ facilitators of adult learning do not exist as such.

We note that a growing number of providers are aware of the importance of the need for quality and accountability.

Whether an adaptation of the Common Quality Assurance Framework for higher education may serve this movement is to be doubted. The nature and scale of adult learning provision and its organisation forms are far too different to make a fruitful comparison with the highly formalised structure of higher education.

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<sup>7</sup> The basic principles of andragogy can be summarized as follows:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centred rather than content-oriented.

See the classical: Knowles, M. (1984). *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (3rd Ed.). Houston, The theoretical framework for adult learning methodologies in the Netherlands is also deeply influenced by the works of Paulo Freire and Miles Horton

A complete rethinking against the background of diversity and variation both in institutional frameworks as in contents and learning andragogy on the issue has to be undertaken.

The EAEA started this process with its CEALF project. In the Netherlands a good practice example is developing in the Popular Universities.

The membership of the Dutch Union of Popular Universities (BNVU) recently adopted a framework for ensuring quality and fostering a culture of quality in the popular universities. This framework is based on recognised standards and guidelines for adult education quality<sup>8</sup>, but especially adapted to be functional in relatively small scale organisation for learning, as most popular universities are. Unnecessary bureaucracy and the inherent formalisation tendencies in much quality assurance mechanisms in use in larger organisations have been avoided in the quality system for popular universities.

### ***Recognition and validation of learning outcomes***

This issue will need much discussion, debate, exchange of views and methods and research in an EU framework.

Both on national level and on the level of Europe concerted action must be undertaken to come to common principles and methodologies to develop a common language to refer to widely varied competencies of persons.

Here as, as is the case with policy making, open and flexible frameworks for assessing, accrediting and validating learning outcomes must be developed.

National Qualification Frameworks and the overall context of the European Qualification Framework may provide tools in this process as long as they are not seen as absolute and the only possible normative standards. If the latter is the case systematisation will lead to formalisation and in the end diminish the richness of the mosaic of diversity. This in turn will lead to a decline in the attractiveness of organised (formal and non-formal) adult learning.

### ***Need for data***

For the development of coherent and coordinated adult learning it is necessary to have adequate data. We agree fully with the plea the Commission makes to improve the quality of data provision. This is true on European level, but also on national level. Certainly in a context where much of the policy implementation is decentralised, as is the case in the Netherlands, systematic data collection and linking the various sources of data is of high importance. Both Eurostat and the national statistical organisation (CBS in the Netherlands) must make it an important aspect of their education data collection work.

### ***European Action***

As argued before more and more concerted action on the European level is needed to take the adult learning agenda forward.

One of the first elements in this will be an active stimulation of member states to develop adequate policy frameworks to arrive at greater coherence and coordination and cooperation between actors in the various subsystems for adult learning.

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<sup>8</sup> As can be found in I.a. the draft document CEALF, published by the EAEA in June 2006

Further element is the facilitation of a European coordination/cooperation network to link the various national bodies and initiatives. Within that structure overarching issues of quality ensuring, developing of andragogical methodologies and approaches, recognition and validation of learning outcomes can be dealt with in terms of exchange of ideas, best practices and concepts but also as a concerted contribution as co-makers of EU policy in this important domain of learning.

One of the more direct actions the EU can take is, following the intentions embedded in this communication, to provide support for the promotion of adult learners week. On the one hand to facilitate the exchange of experiences between organizers in the various EU countries and on the other hand to back up local and national activities with EU wide promotion campaigns to the public. A visibility on the EU stage can strengthen the Adult learning promotion effects on national and local level.