

Communication from the Commission

Adult learning: It is never too late to learn

**Draft version June 2006**

## 1. Introduction

The Commission's 2001 Communication on *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* and the 2002 Council Resolution on Lifelong Learning stressed the importance of lifelong learning as vital not only for competitiveness and employability, but also for social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development.

The recent conclusions from the Spring 2006 European Council reiterate that "education and training are critical factors to develop the EU's long-term potential for competitiveness as well as for social cohesion. Investments in education and training produce high returns which substantially outweigh the costs and reach far beyond 2010".

Adult learning is a key and vital component of lifelong learning. Definitions of adult learning vary across countries and sometimes within the same country. There is no consensus on where the line should be drawn for a number of reasons, including the multiplicity of forms and contexts in which adult learning can take place (formal, non formal and informal learning<sup>1</sup>). For the purpose of this Communication adult learning is defined as *systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning after having left initial education and training*. This definition embraces all forms of learning undertaken by adults, regardless of the settings and contexts, and of the reasons why adults engage in it. The Communication supports the case for a comprehensive approach to adult learning, where the entire adult population and its diverse educational and skill needs are addressed, while acknowledging that for the sake of effectiveness policies need to be tailored to the different target groups.

The role and contribution of adult learning to economy and society at large, in addition to personal development and fulfilment, is increasingly being recognised. Recent research<sup>2</sup> confirms the importance of investing in adult learning, in the interest of both economic efficiency and social cohesion. Public and private benefits resulting from adult learning include greater employability, increased productivity and better-quality employment, reduced expenditure in areas such as unemployment benefits, welfare payments, pensions, but also increased social returns in terms of improved civic participation, better health, lower incidence of criminality, and individual well-being and fulfilment. Research on older adults indicates that those who engage in learning are healthier, with a consequent reduction in health care costs<sup>3</sup>.

A number of policy documents at European and national levels embrace the inclusive vision of adult learning within an overarching lifelong learning framework, but, in practice, in the majority of Member States education and training systems are still front-end loaded, concentrating on youth education and training in the early stages of the lifecycle. Limited progress has been made in changing systems to mirror the need for learning throughout the lifespan, and despite the development of lifelong learning strategies, implementation remains the challenge in the majority of the Member States<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> The terms formal, non-formal and informal learning used in this Communication are the same as defined in the Memorandum of Lifelong Learning, SEC(2000) 1832 of 30.10.2000.

<sup>2</sup> Promoting Adult learning, OECD (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Tom Schuller, John Preston, Cathie Hammond, Angela Brassett-Grundy and John Bynner (2004), *The benefits of learning*, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, University of London. **Also study carried out by National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).**

<sup>4</sup> "Modernising education and training: a vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe - 2006 Joint Interim Report of the Council and the Commission on progress under the "Education & Training 2010

The present Communication aims to draw the attention of policy-makers to the importance of adult learning within the overarching lifelong learning policies and as a vital contribution to achieving economic growth, social cohesion and personal fulfilment, and encourages stakeholders to put it firmly on the political agenda. Concrete action plans which include measures to improve the quality of access, participation and outcomes in adult education and training should have a central focus in all the lifelong learning strategies of the Member States.

In addressing adult learning, the Communication will take full account of the results achieved so far through cooperation at European level, notably within the framework of the “Education and training 2010” process and more specifically within the “Copenhagen process”.

## 2. The challenges to be faced

It is clear that notwithstanding the political emphasis placed on lifelong learning in recent years, adult learning has not always gained the recognition it deserves in terms of visibility, policy prioritisation and resources. This dichotomy between the political discourse and the reality on the ground is even more striking when set against the background of the major challenges currently confronting Europe.

### *Competitiveness*

Europe has committed itself to being a knowledge society, combining economic performance with social inclusion. Europe’s key economic challenge is to raise its growth and employment performance while preserving social cohesion. If Europe wants to be a competitive player in the global economic arena, continued up-skilling of the labour force is essential. Rapid progress in other regions of the world<sup>5</sup> shows the importance of innovative, advanced and quality education and training as a key factor of economic competitiveness in Europe.

Europe has 75 million low skilled workers<sup>6</sup>, one third of the labour force. Estimates indicate that by 2010 only 15% of newly created jobs will be for those with basic schooling, while 50% of net additional jobs will require tertiary level qualifications<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, international surveys show that a significant share of the European population does not have the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community<sup>8</sup>, and early school leavers are particular at risk<sup>9</sup>. Acquisition of at least basic skills and a good literacy level, which are fundamental component of the key

---

work programme”, adopted in February 2006, OJ C 79 of 1.4.2006, [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2006/c\\_079/c\\_07920060401en00010019.pdf](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2006/c_079/c_07920060401en00010019.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> As an example, estimates reveal that China will reach the same level of research funding as Europe by 2010 (give source).

<sup>6</sup> Labour Force Survey 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Vocational education and training – key to the future, Cedefop synthesis of the Maastricht study, Luxembourg, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Literacy in the information age, final report of the International Adult Literacy Survey, OECD, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> “Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in Education and Training – Report based on indicators and benchmarks – Report 2006”. The Report, adopted by the Council in XXX, show no progress since 2000 in reducing the percentage of low achievers in reading literacy at age 15 (19,8% low achievers in 2003; 2010 benchmark: 15.5%), or in raising the completion rate for upper-secondary education (15 % early school leavers in 2005; 2010 benchmark: 10%).

competences needed in a knowledge society and economy, remain a challenge for many groups<sup>10</sup>.

### *Demographic change*

Europe is facing unprecedented demographic changes that will have a major impact on the society, on the economy and on education and training. The European population is ageing and the proportion of senior citizens is increasing throughout Europe: over the next 20 years the number of younger Europeans will fall by 20%<sup>11</sup>. One in three Europeans will be over 60 years old, and one in ten will be over 80. These developments entail serious challenges for the European social model: recent long-term projections show that the pension, health and long-term care costs linked to an aging population will lead to an average increase by 4.4% for the EU-25 and up to 10% in some Member States<sup>12</sup>. Early school leavers and drop-outs (6 million according to the Report 2006<sup>13</sup>) constitute an increasingly important challenge as age groups become smaller. Estimates of financial costs for early school leavers by Finnish researchers show that an unfulfilled labour input and parallel extra social and health services used throughout lifespan lead to accumulate costs of approximately 0.6 – 2.5 million € per person.

The reduced flow of highly qualified young entrants into the labour market will make an imperative to prolong working life and to invest more in upgrading the skills of older adults. These facts along with an average unemployment rate of 18.7% for young people aged under 25 years and the reality that only one in every three persons aged 55 – 64 years is in paid employment, point to an obvious need to employ the variety and full potential of adult learning to increase the participation in the workforce of young people and extend that of older people.

### *Active ageing*

Not only is Europe ageing, people are reaching old age in better physical and mental health and life expectancy after retirement is extending. Learning should be an integral part of this new phase of their lives, be it in the form of information and guidance to prepare them for retirement and inform them of their rights and services, or as a leisure-time activity contributing to their personal fulfilment. In many countries education systems have not yet started to address the emerging needs of this group of citizens, who also have enormous potential in terms of what they can contribute to the learning of others. Given the increasing proportion of retired people, an expansion of “third age” learning provision is needed (including for instance encouraging participation of mature students in Higher Education)<sup>14</sup>. Such provision will have a vital role in keeping older, retired people in touch with their social environment and its developments. Facilities must be made available for this group, either by expanding local schools to meet their needs or developing local learning centres in local

---

<sup>10</sup> Commission proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning, COM (2005) 548 final, of 10.11.2005.

<sup>11</sup> The birth rate has fallen from 2.1 to 1.5 per woman in the Member States. The number of young adults (25 – 39 years) will start to fall in 2005 and accelerate significantly after 2010 to about 16%. The age group of 40 – 54 years will also start to fall in 2010. People aged over 55 will grow by 9.6% to 2010 and by 15.5% between 2010 and 2030. The number of older persons aged 65 – 79 will increase till 2030 by about 37.4%. In the neighbouring regions we see an increase of the population till about 2025. The working age population (15 – 64 years) is due to fall by 20.8 million in 2030 (Source: Green Paper “Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations”, Communication from the Commission of 16.3.2005, COM (2005) 94 final).

<sup>12</sup> Joint report 2006 on social protection and social inclusion, adopted by the Council and the Commission on 10 March 2006, [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/social\\_inclusion/docs/2006/cs2006\\_7294\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/docs/2006/cs2006_7294_en.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>14</sup> Commission Communication “Delivering the modernisation agenda for universities: education, research and innovation”, COM (2006) 208 final, of 10.5.2006.

community centres or libraries, etc, which would also function as a place to meet for social or cultural activities.

### *Migration*

Immigration (internal mobility within the Community and inward migration) can be seen as a counter balance to an aging population in Europe. However, it is not a simple matter of the incoming migrants filling the vacancies in the labour market. Despite immigration policies requiring a certain level of skills for entry being in place in many Member States, many of the new residents, even high-skilled people, have major requirements in terms of language, knowledge and skills.

There are huge challenges for adult learning stakeholders when it comes to provision of adult learning opportunities in relation to language, social and cultural knowledge and aptitudes that enable individuals and communities to participate rather than become disadvantaged and ghettoised. In this context the issues of inter-cultural and intergenerational learning, coupled with inter-religious dialogue are of growing importance.

### *Social inclusion*

Building on a more inclusive Europe is an essential element in achieving the Lisbon goals and beyond 2010. Recent reports confirm that poverty and social exclusion continue to be a serious challenge for all Member States<sup>15</sup>. In all Member States low levels of initial education, unemployment, rural isolation and reduced life chances on a wide range of grounds (age, disability, ethnicity, family status, gender, and sexual orientation) are serving to marginalize large numbers of people and to exclude them from the benefits of society and from making a contribution as active citizens. New forms of illiteracy in the shape of exclusion from access to and use of, ICTs in professional and daily life are exacerbating this exclusion: adults who are not computer literate are deprived of essential information and facilities which are increasingly only available in digital form.

Adult learning has a key role to play in the further development of the European social model. It provides individuals, families and communities with opportunities of raising their education levels, gaining recognised qualifications, getting good employment, enjoying improved living and working conditions, participating in their community and being involved as active citizens in the local, regional, national and European-level decisions that affect them.

## **3. Taking the adult learning agenda forward**

To take the adult learning agenda forward it is important to recognise the current realities and challenges in relation to participation in adult learning in the Member States.

Adult participation in education and training, which is essential to raise the level of skills of the European population and contribute to individual and community well-being, remains limited. Compared with the benchmark of 12.5% participation in adult learning by 2010, the average rate in 2005 was 10.8% (best performing countries Sweden, Denmark and Finland). There was wide variation around this average, ranging from a low of 1.3% to a high of 35.8%. Despite this wide variation in the *volume* of participation, there is remarkable similarity across Member States in the *distribution* of adult learning, with those with the lowest levels of initial

---

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 13.

education, the older people, people in rural areas and those working in SMEs being the least likely to participate in all countries<sup>16</sup>.

Barriers to participation by individuals may be policy-related; informational (level of access to good and timely information), provider-related (entry requirements, cost, timing of provision, level of learning supports, quality of provision; nature of learning outcomes etc); situational (the extent to which the life situation or the social environment of the adult supports participation) and dispositional (the self-esteem and self-confidence of the adult as a learner, often linked to failure in previous educational experiences).

Clearly, there is an urgent need to increase the volume of participation in adult learning in the Member States and to address its distribution so as to encourage, enable and support the adults least likely to participate to engage in learning in all its modes, formal, non-formal and informal. There is a parallel need to improve the impact of participation in terms of the quality of the outcomes of learning.

### **Key messages**

To respond to this dual challenge regarding the quantity and quality of adult learning and thereby make a contribution to addressing the broader economic and social challenges facing Europe, five key messages for adult learning stakeholders are presented here.

#### *a. A coherent and integrated approach*

One of the main challenges of adult learning is to make optimal use of the richness of learning provisions and settings. In general adult learning systems in the Member States are highly diverse and fragmented. Multiple partners have a stake in policy-making and implementation, including ministries, social partners, public providers, churches, social services, NGOs, private for-profit providers, regional and local governments. This is due to the fact that adult learning embraces diverse areas such as: up-skilling the labour force, contributing to social inclusion and sustainable development and facilitating personal development. At political level, decisions are made at central, regional or local level, and sometimes at different levels concurrently, with many countries showing high degrees of decentralisation<sup>17</sup>.

Depending on the point-of-view, this diversity constitutes a “rich mosaic” or a “confusing mélange”. The different types of stakeholders and levels of responsibility involved may result in conflicting interests, duplications and inefficient use of public and private funding, lack of visibility, and makes efficient and comprehensive monitoring of the whole field problematic. At the same time, the variety of adult learning is vital to ensure that the different and complex needs of the adult population are satisfied, and should be maintained.

In this context, an integrated and co-ordinated approach is key to guarantee the success of adult learning. Co-ordinating the activities of the different players can help improve coherence, rationalise scarce resources and contribute to more efficient public and private

---

<sup>16</sup> Adults with the highest levels of initial education participate in learning seven times more than those with the lowest levels of initial education. Participation decreases after the age of 34 years (Source: Progress report 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Decentralisation, in different forms and degrees, is in evidence in a majority of countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Romania, UK (Source: OECD; Eurydice).

spending, while taking full account of the richness of their diversity. Co-ordination is needed at various levels:

- Within education policies, based on the recognition that the quality of the early school experience have a critical influence on learners' motivation and ability to access and progress in adult learning, in order to reduce the number of drop-outs and hence of those in need of second chance education, and help youngsters grow and develop into lifelong learners;
- Between education and employment and social policies and other policies affecting employers, in order to provide adult learners with appropriate supports (such as guidance and counselling, childcare, support for people with special needs, etc.);
- Between government and a wide range of non governmental actors, such as the social partners, private and public educational institutions, community groups, and with the industry for the definition of skills needs and the development of learning opportunities, not least through the development of local partnerships<sup>18</sup>.

While respecting and protecting the variety and diversity in adult learning, Member States should adopt an holistic and integrated approach within an overarching lifelong learning framework, acknowledging that all dimensions and forms of adult learning are of equal value and social and economic importance. National lifelong strategies should include adult learning and involve an action plan to: facilitate access, increase participation, improve progression and strengthen the overall provision of adult learning.

The establishment of a national body in which all education and training sub-systems are represented and with strong links to the labour market and to social partners, could promote co-ordination, coherent policy development, more efficient use of the financing and the human resources and deliver more clear information and guidance to the potential learners<sup>19</sup>.

#### *b. Investing in adult learning*

Providing the entire adult population with the right mix of skills, attitudes and competencies which are necessary for meeting the rapidly changing requirements of the labour market and of the society requires that adequate investments are ensured to adult learning. Financing arrangements are necessary to support participation and increase the effectiveness of adult learning. Numerous financing schemes investments have been introduced in the Member States (tax deduction schemes, grants, mechanisms to directly support adult such as individual learning accounts and vouchers, etc.), with a varying degree of effectiveness.

A key factor affecting the participation in adult learning is the level and the proportions of share of investment by stakeholders – governments, social partners, enterprises, civil society, and individuals. Given the considerable private returns generated by adult learning, co-financing should be the rule. However, public investment in adult learning - in all its forms and locations - will continue to be vital to stimulate participation, especially in cases of

---

<sup>18</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of current developments of local learning centres and learning partnerships, see Communication of the Commission – A study of the current situation, Research voor Beleid and PLATO (university of Leiden), Leiden 2005. Good examples of local partnershis can also be found in the R3L initiative (the “learning regions”), which was launched by the European Commission in 2003. 120 regions in northern and southern Europe, centred around 17 projects, exchange knowledge and know-how, and develop their research, methods and results in order to promote life-long learning.

<sup>19</sup> See also Communication from the Commission “Efficiency and Equity in European education and training systems”, COM (XXX)

market failure in relation to those with the lowest education and skills levels and those from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds, and especially in relation to the provision of basic skills and key competences.

Investing in basic skills is regarded as costly and not profitable in the short-term. However, research shows that an equitable distribution of skills across populations has a strong impact on overall economic performance; raising the basic skills of all individuals will have a larger long-term effect on economic growth (by making the entire workforce more productive) than investing in improving skills of a selected group of high-skilled people<sup>20</sup>. Raising the overall level of skills of the population will also bring a number of individual and societal benefits in terms of improved health and well-being, and increased civic participation.

In a context of stakeholder co-financing, Member States should make available core public funding to provide a sustainable and appropriate infrastructure for the provision of formal and non-formal learning opportunities<sup>21</sup>. Equally, adults should learn and be guided in how to invest in their own lifelong learning as well.

Additional funding is needed for adults who have been least well-served by education and training in the past, including early school leavers, adults with low literacy and numeracy levels, adults with few or no qualifications, older people, and other persons who may be in difficult economic and social situations such as recent migrants.

### *c. Ensuring the quality of adult learning*

Poor quality in the provision of adult learning and the lack of well designed courses fitting the needs of adults and the way in which they learn can result in low and poor quality learning outcomes and participation. As for the other educational sub-systems, quality is multifaceted and includes different instruments: information and guidance; needs analysis and contents (relevant learning provisions meeting actual needs); actual delivery (methods and settings; providers; staff, etc.); learning supports; internal and external monitoring and evaluation, etc. While recognising that all these aspects are of equal importance, the following aspects deserve special attention<sup>22</sup>.

*Pedagogies* - Within a lifelong learning framework there is a move from a teaching supply paradigm to a learning demand paradigm with the learner at the centre of the learning endeavour. In addition, adults want to be able to draw on learning supports such as guidance, literacy provision and study skills as required. In structured learning, teaching methods that recognise the adulthood of adults are required. This implies a more symmetrical pedagogy where the adult is the key actor in learning and where intended learning outcomes are explicit. It also requires teaching materials and programmes structured in such a way that the adults' needs are better taken into account (including use of ICT both as a means of provision via distance learning, and as a tool for learning; flexible teaching arrangements; development of local open learning centres for those who cannot access learning close to home, etc).

---

<sup>20</sup> Coulombe, S., J.F. Tremblay and S. Marchand (2004), *International Adult literacy Survey, Literacy Scores, Human Capital and Growth across fourteen OECD Countries*, Statistics Canada, Ottawa.

<sup>21</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>22</sup> Adult education trends and issues in Europe, study conducted by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) in 2006. Under finalisation.

*Quality of staff* - The professional development of people working in adult learning is a vital determinant of the quality of adult learning provision. The recent Joint Report on progress on the Education and Training 2010 work programme regretted the fact that 'the professional development of vocational teachers and trainers remains a challenge for most countries'. The regret might easily have been extended to adult learning. So far governments seem to have paid little attention to defining the content and processes for initial training for personnel working in adult learning. There are many educational and professional routes to becoming an adult learning practitioner and the profession is not always recognised within formal career structures.

The changing requirements of teaching adults imply a radical modification of the role of adult learning practitioners; the notion of adult learning staff increasingly includes a wide range of different actors with different duties, occupational status and educational backgrounds: educational managers, course planners, guidance and administrative staff, etc. At the same time, compared to other educational sub-systems, adult learning is often characterised by high percentages of part-time staff (and, in some cases, of people working on a voluntary basis), with no career perspective and often hour-by-hour contracts.

*Quality of providers* - Allied to the question of the quality of the staff working in adult learning, the overall quality of providers needs to be addressed through provider accreditation mechanisms, quality assurance frameworks and internal and external monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning outcomes. Governments have a crucial role to play in this respect, through, for example, establishing regulatory frameworks, setting quality standards, certifying adherence to these standards and making information available to service users on provider performance against explicit indicators. Quality assurance is a powerful means to improve access to learning for all, to assessing and documenting the learning outcomes, and to ensure efficiency of the learning process and a better use of resources.

To increase the overall quality of adult learning and thereby better meet the needs of the different stakeholders served by adult learning, Member States need to put in place initial and continuing professional development measures to qualify and up-skill adult learning staff. The resultant qualifications must be recognised within formal career structures.

The European Common Quality Assurance Framework and the standards and guidelines for higher education should form the basis to build on further quality assurance development in adult learning. In order to foster a culture of quality in adult learning Member States should envisage further establishment and development of Quality Assurance Reference Points also for adult learning, including all stakeholders and being explicitly part of governance policy.

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

A lifelong learning paradigm values learning from a multiplicity of learning sites – formal, non-formal and informal. This principle stems from the belief that knowledge generation is no longer a monopoly of traditional education and training institutions, and that all forms of learning are of equal importance in contributing to the achievement of knowledge, skills and attitudes which are necessary to function well at work and in society.

To enable Europe to become a knowledge-based society, it is not sufficient to simply recognise and validate formal learning only. Recognition and validation of non-formal and

informal learning forms a cornerstone in the lifelong learning strategy. The learner should be at the centre of the learning process and the learning outcomes should be recognised and valued, regardless of where and how they are achieved. Such recognition of non-formal and informal learning enables the learner to identify his/her starting point, to gain entry to a programme of learning at a particular level, to achieve credits towards a qualification and/or to achieve a full qualification based on competences. It serves to motivate reluctant participants, to add value to prior learning and/or to save time and/or money through reducing or eliminating the need to relearn what has already been learned.

Emphasis on recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning is not new. The European White Paper, *Teaching and Learning – Towards the Learning Society* identified recognition of skills as a key component of the acquisition of new knowledge on the grounds that it would contribute significantly to the employability of young people and workers. This emphasis was followed up and strengthened in the Communication on Lifelong Learning of 2001. In 2004 Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning were adopted by the Education Ministers of the EU.<sup>21</sup>

Most Member States have taken up the baton and have, to varying degrees, put in place systems to validate and recognise non-formal and informal learning. Some countries (for example, Finland; France; Netherlands, Norway and Portugal) have well-established systems of recognition of prior learning while several have recently introduced measures or are in the process of doing so (for example, Belgium [Flemish Community]; Denmark; Ireland; Slovenia; Spain; Sweden). The form that recognition takes varies considerably across countries<sup>23</sup>.

The further development of validation methods and systems in the Member States requires that the following challenges are met:

- the introduction of validation must be based on the inclusion of the relevant stakeholders, in order to promote ownership and credibility;
- the quality of assessment methods, and the institutions applying them, must be continuously improved. If this is not the case, serious doubts about the trustworthiness of validation may arise;
- the objectives of education and training – at all levels – must be reformulated in terms of learning outcomes. This is crucial for validation; as long as objectives are based on input factors (time, place of learning) validation is difficult to accomplish.

Member States should take one step forwards for recognition and validation of learning outcomes – irrespective of where these have been acquired, by a systematic exchange of experiences. Member States should also give priority to meet the objectives set in the Common European principles on validation and recognition: work towards equal access for validation as well as fair treatment of all individuals; establish principles for quality assurance in the field of validation and recognition and ensure that all relevant stakeholders are involved in the development and implementation of validation and recognition. Development of validation and recognition should be linked to the development of National Qualification Frameworks within the overall context of the European Qualification Framework.

---

<sup>23</sup> Full reference of the source (Inventory + EAEA)

#### *e. Indicators and benchmarks*

In order to cover the multiplicity of adult learning, a multitude of data is needed to cover all aspects. Compared to compulsory education, available data are not always very reliable, given the reduced number of administrative sources that can be used, and are hardly comparable across countries<sup>24</sup>.

Data availability on adult learning is expected to improve in the years to come, as results of existing and forthcoming international surveys (Eurostat's Adult Education Survey - a household survey on adult learning which is being currently carried out- and the Continuing Vocational Training Survey, as well as the OECD's international survey on adult skills which is currently under preparation - PIAAC) become available. However, some gaps remain, for example as regards adult education providers and the quality of provision. The Commission is currently carrying out a survey to assess what information is available nationally in this area.

Further research and analyses is needed and will have a key role to play in exploiting the statistics available and in exploring crucial issues like the returns on formal, non-formal and informal learning and the general role of informal learning in adults' lives

The quality and comparability of data on adult learning needs further improvement. Some data are still missing at European level. There is, in particular, an urgent need to address the issues of quality (of provision, of providers, of staff).

The work of European Commission in this area, including Eurostat, should concentrate on making best use of existing survey and data, on improving basic concepts and definitions, and on expanding coverage and timeliness of data. Should unavailability of politically relevant data on adult learning persist, new data collections or surveys should be considered.

#### **4. European Union action**

Complementary to actions to be taken at national level<sup>25</sup>, the European Union will contribute to addressing the challenges identified above, by strengthening existing actions and developing new ones.

1. The development and dissemination of innovative pedagogical approaches, methods and materials, including for intercultural learning, and of innovative ICT-based contents, services, pedagogies and practices, will largely be supported by the existing programmes and funding, including the new Lifelong Learning Programme. Promotion and strengthening of learning opportunities for groups at risks, in particular for migrants, in relation to language, social and cultural knowledge and aptitudes will receive special attention under the new Lifelong Learning Programme.
2. Within the "Education and Training 2010" Work Programme, the Commission has established clusters groups in order to facilitate the implementation of education and training policies and to enhance mutual learning and trust. Adult learning will be emphasized in the different clusters and have the possibility to develop peer learning

<sup>24</sup> See footnote 22.

<sup>25</sup> This includes actions taken by the Social partners in the context of their "Framework of actions for the lifelong development of competences and qualifications", adopted in 2002.

activities. The co-ordination group should follow up the developments and assure that adult learning will have the right place.

3. European Social Fund priorities regarding encouraging active ageing and prolonging working lives and increasing participation in the labour market will support developments for this specific target group.
4. The development at European level of tools such as the European Qualification Framework (EQF) and the European Credit for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) are of key importance for adult learning:
  - The EQF will promote a shift towards learning outcomes based education and training systems and the development of National Qualification Frameworks, hence strengthening overall coordination, facilitating access, improving participation and enabling progress in national education, training and learning systems.
  - In order to increase the mobility of adult learners better information and guidance are needed. ECVET will provide practical opportunities to accumulate credits for adult learners.
5. Based on the European Common Quality Assurance Framework and the standards and guidelines for higher education, quality assurance instruments will be developed for adult learning.
6. The work initiated by the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks will be reinforced. The current framework on indicators and benchmarks will be further developed to meet the needs of adult learning. Research on the quality of provisions and providers will also be initiated.
7. The Commission will consider setting up and promoting European networks of actors on the field of adult learning to support mutual learning and national developments.
8. The conference on adult learning which will take place during the Finnish presidency of the EU will contribute to further actions at national and European level to promote adult learning in working life, to inspire and encourage active citizenship, to validate and recognise competences, to improve staff development and to promote learning communities in a multicultural Europe.