

# Information on Adult Education in Europe – *InfoLetter*<sup>1</sup>

Michel Sommer, *InfoLetter* 4/5 2009

## LISBON STRATEGY: NEW GOALS, NEW MOMENTUM?

The Lisbon strategy, with which the European economy should be made sustainable, expires next year. Adult education has a small, but not unimportant role in the current strategy, particularly with regards to employability. (Michael Sommer) 12.5 per cent is the magic number: This is how high the participation rate should be for all adults in continuing education. This was the target set in the current Lisbon strategy, which was adopted in 2000 and is now to be updated again. However, the EU has clearly fallen short of this target and has currently only achieved a rate of 9.6 per cent. In the individual countries, large differences prevail: The frontrunners are – as usual – the Nordic states, England, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Austria; the lowest values were recorded by Hungary, where the percentage has also fallen sharply in recent years, Romania and Bulgaria.

Lifelong learning was also part of the yearly progress reports on the Member States. As a result recommendations for 2009 included a call for improvements in Estonia, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus, Poland and Slovakia.

### *A long wish list*

On the whole, a frequent criticism was that the entire strategy has brought nothing but a lot of paper and a long wish list, which the countries could hardly put into practice. In the areas of education and training, the difficulty of imple-

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mentation was also attributed to a lack of direct support on the part of the EU programmes.

Discussions on the amendment of the overall strategy have already begun everywhere; governments, professional associations, parties, trade unions and lobbyists are preparing their positions. The most important guidelines for the post-Lisbon strategy are planned to be adopted at the EU summit in March 2010. If the issue of climate protection was regarded as the most important goal in the strategy up to 2008, the economic crisis brought the economy and employment back on top of the agenda.

In December 2008, the Commission announced an increased benchmark for education participation of 15%, along with further benchmarks for basic skills, knowledge of foreign languages and employability. It is worth noting that the paper explicitly does not just have occupation-related education in mind, but also other fields, namely "citizenship education", innovation and creativity. The European Council have also largely agreed to this paper. In preparation for the follow-up to the Lisbon strategy, the Social Platform, the European Trade Union Confederation and the European Environmental Bureau (and later CONCORD) started an initiative called the Spring Alliance, in which it presented the issues that civil society feels strongly about – For a European Union that puts people and planet first.

As a member of the Social Platform, EAEA (European Association for Education of Adults) has contributed to the manifesto of the Spring Alliance and is one of the signatories. Gina Ebner, secretary general: „The Lisbon strategy was often summarized with the two terms ‘jobs and growth’, and while it did underline three columns of economic, social and environmental, the general perception was that the economic approach was the favoured one“. EAEA published a proposal with the following elements: Establish an economic and governance strategy that serves people and planet, preserve and restore ecosystems, establish inclusive societies, promote green and quality jobs, assume global responsibility, and improve democracy.

**Christoffer Støerup, InfoLetter 4/5 2009**

## **THE GHOST OF TRANSITION**

Adult educators in Romania are faced with a large number of challenges highlighted by the crisis, which alarmingly resemble those of the transition period. Since there are no national strategies following up on the past experiences, each

educator must use his intuition and the few resources at hand. Solutions are thus often found on a grass roots level in a diminutive way. (Christoffer Stoerup) The last strategy for adult education in Romania was formulated during communism, emphasis then was not only on paying lip service to an ideology with few convinced adepts, but also on subjects desired by the learners then as today; learning foreign languages, painting and theatre, usage of technology and practical courses like tailoring or interior design.

### *Informed citizenship*

In 2009 the common goal of educating for democracy and an understanding of the society (national as well as global) encompassing the individual, has not yet crystallized neither as an end nor in a set of means.

At cultural houses, one of the main providers of adult education, throughout the country focus is, as it was, on traditional folk and high culture. This cements the institutions' backwards orientation and does not address the increasing alienation of the population in the rural areas from a city life which is aligning itself with the trends of globalization.

### *Transition-like restructuring*

Adult education and vocational training are still treated as one discipline in Romania, and both are most often being provided under the same roof. Therefore the challenge of retraining victims of structural changes on the labour market, has been an obvious but unreachd ambition for providers of adult education. Such a challenge is again approaching, and though details are still clouded it seems certain that Romania conforming to the obligations of the loan packages negotiated with the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and EU has to lay off 20% of it's public servants in a time of increasing unemployment.

In the mid-nineties Romania found itself in a similar situation, with falling standards of living and a huge budget deficit forcing the government to slim down state enterprises and thus add to the unemployment.

Too much of the generation entering the chaotic labour market of the nineties, was "lost" and never acquired the basic competencies necessary for reentering the labour market successfully once times got better.

The economic situation was then followed by an sociocultural trend of suspicion and alienation towards the globalization and a nostalgia towards village life and the social and material security from the communist times. The light xenophobia reached it's peak at the 2000 presidential elections during which the

nationalist champion Corneliu Vadim Tudor, to the fear of many came in second in the presidential elections.

It is of course not adult educators' job to prevent voters from opting for certain political parties, but easing unavoidable economic and socio-cultural changes, empowering citizens and countering alienation are.

As usual this task falls upon the local adult educators and their initiative, if that alone will be enough to soothe the hard times ahead remains to be seen.

**Susanne Lattke, InfoLetter 3, 2009**

### **HOW EUROPEAN IS GERMAN ADULT EDUCATION?**

Europe – for many people this is synonymous with the European Union, which in turn is synonymous with an administrative machine out of touch with reality, making life difficult for citizens and politicians alike with absurdly unfair demands and regulations that come from far-away Brussels. And scepticism about the EU is certainly not uncommon in the educational sector, but opportunities are also seen here.

Educational protagonists are continually finding fault – either justly or unjustly – with the supposed overstepping of authority and spoon-feeding by Brussels. On the other hand the benefits of being involved in the EU – improved opportunities for cross-border cooperation, great potential for motivation and innovation, the opening up of new markets and subsidies – are very well known and welcomed.

With its scholarship programmes for lifelong learning, the EU supports international cooperation projects between educational establishments as well as the international mobility of lecturers and students. Adult education has its own programme, 'Grundtvig', devoted to it, for which the National Agency in Germany has been registering steadily increasing numbers of applications for almost all types of measures for years.

This development is pleasing and indicates a growing interest in European cooperation and European subjects within German adult education in practice.

However, if we look at the figures in relation to the size of the potential target group, then we can hardly talk about a high level of European penetration by German adult education. As part of the Grundtvig Programme Germany participated in funding around 120 'learning partnerships' and around 50 'multilateral projects' in 2008, making Germany numerically one of the strongest countries represented in the Grundtvig Programme compared with other EU countries.

But if we start from the estimated 18,000 continuing education institutions in Germany, we have to suspect that Europe does not feature strongly at grass-roots level.

On the other hand the phenomenon of a group of EU-professionals developing and moving successfully through the demanding terrain of European, or to be more precise, EU-subsidised, cooperation can be observed in the adult education sector.

So is Europe becoming, or to put it better, remaining, a matter for experts? The gap between the EU-professionals and those who still have (and want) little or nothing to do with Europe hardly seems to be closing in practice in adult education.

For a smaller number of – often newer – institutions, EU projects have become a new ‘business segment’, through which they can generate income. Assuming they have appropriate focus, specialisation and professionalism, it can be a very profitable field. However, institutions which tend to get involved in European projects as ‘secondary’ and ‘extra’ activities – and that applies to most of the traditional adult education providers – have to both take up the challenges of intercultural cooperation and, in particular, face a demanding bureaucratic machine, which often has a deterrent effect, though efforts on the part of the EU to reduce this very well-known problem by simplifying structures and procedures have been successful to some extent. This shows the popularity of the types of learning partnership projects conceived as low-threshold entry into European cooperation. For other types of project however it is still true that the administrative outlay required is often felt to be disproportionate to the content of the work involved; the demands made by the EU with regard to the quality of the project results and project conception and management have increased in such a way that a project subsidy can increasingly only be achieved by ‘EU project specialists’; and finally against this background the level of the EU financial grants – which must always be seen alongside the project participant’s own contribution – often appears less attractive.

If we also bear in mind that the discussion on key EU political developments, such as the European Qualification Framework, remains largely restricted to narrow circles of experts in Germany, we can (broadly) conclude that German adult education is European – in approach.