

11 AVENUES. 11 PROPOSALS

EDUCATION – THE LINK BETWEEN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

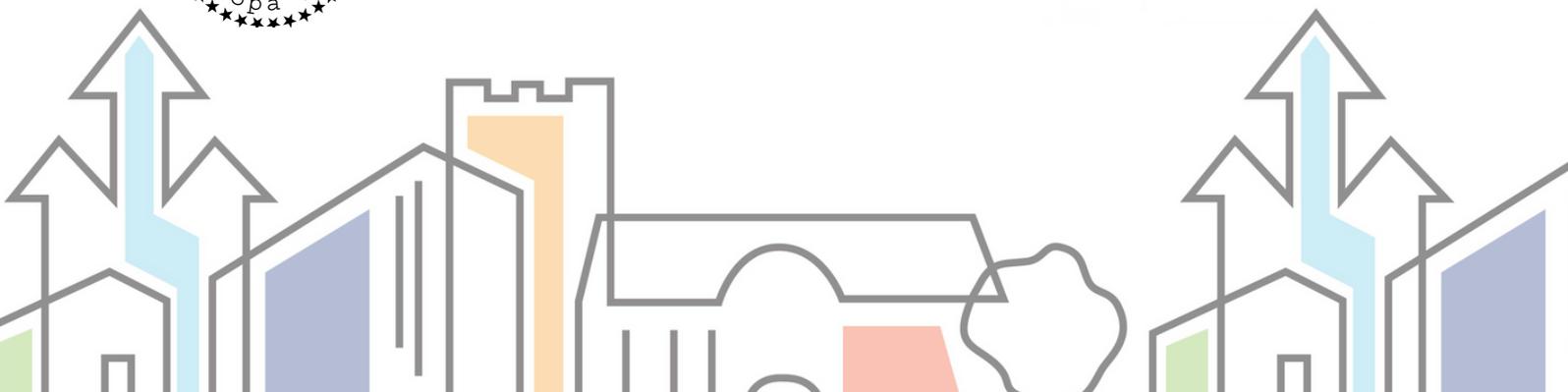
With the adoption of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 accompanied by a unique Recovery Plan conditions have been created to develop a more just, resilient and sustainable Europe. A robust and new cohesion policy is one of the cornerstones of this ambitious endeavour.

The 'Meet the Citizen 2.0' project of the European House covers 5 countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CZ, HU, HR, RO and SK); all of them are massive beneficiaries of the EU Cohesion Fund. Our 11 working papers indicate possible avenues how to use effectively these financial instruments in remote, less developed areas of these countries highlighting not only the importance of EU assistance in daily life of citizens but simultaneously contributing to reducing the still significant gap between the citizens and the EU institutions.

Each paper of ours offers not only a brief analyses of an important aspect of cohesion policy in Central and Eastern Europe but proposes also practical solutions for the involvement of citizens, their organisations and other stakeholders in practising partnership for making cohesion policy a success.



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Education offers civil society in the Central European region new approaches and opportunities in the digital transformation. Lifelong learning includes a broad range of activities for civil actors aiming to make citizens fit for the digital age. For this purpose, lifelong learning can be used best as a tool designed for adults aged 25-64 participating in non-formal education and training. The focus of a new civil contribution to education should be on the improvement of digital skills and competences of adult learners, thus helping to give them equal opportunities to benefit from the digital transition in the region.

Civil society has a rich tradition in adult education: Folk high schools, trade union study circles, evening classes for workers in public training centres, citizens' grassroots movements, the present technologies for promoting self-education; these achievements of human innovation over the past 150 years have also been made with a greater involvement of civil educators. The aims they pursued included improving citizens' skills and knowledge; making them capable of adapting to fundamental changes and helping them contribute to the public welfare and humanity.

The original aims of lifelong learning have not gone out of date but, on the contrary, play an even more crucial role in Europe. In these turbulent times

when societies are not prepared but are under strong pressure to enter into the green and digital transformation of Europe and when 17 million people (among them around 3 million young people) have lost their jobs because of the Covid-19 crisis, educators need to act by delivering innovative and viable solutions to adult learners.

These new actions should be based more on shared responsibility and partnerships which have proved reliable in the past by developing best practices of stakeholders in European transboundary cooperation including civil society organisations, educational, training and research institutions, technology companies, municipalities, public authorities etc. who have been working together in different EU-funded programmes such as Interreg and Erasmus+.

Key actors in adult education need to adopt new approaches in order to ensure a smooth transition into the digital world and also to help people in the Covid-19 pandemic who wish to participate in adult education. Tackling these huge challenges which Europe is facing today requires quick responses to many questions such as: What is the impact of digitalisation on the lives and future perspectives of European citizens? How can lifelong learning help them to enter into the digital era? How can those people who were laid off in tourism, catering and other branches



hit by the devastating social and economic effects of the pandemic find other career paths? How can adult education increase youth employment in this regard? How can adult education respond to the needs of other vulnerable groups, especially immigrants, elderly people and people living with disabilities? How can adult education and vocational training complement each other in order to offer citizens viable solutions?

To give the right answers, stakeholders at different levels must first of all work together and establish the necessary conditions such as better infrastructure, digital equipment, connectivity of distance, online and blended learning, digitally competent and confident teachers and training staff, high-quality learning content, user-friendly tools and secure platforms connected also to the ethical guidelines on artificial intelligence (AI) etc.

These preparations for providing effective solutions for adult learners have to be made in a challenging environment in Europe and its regions. Over the past five years, the participation rate in non-formal education and training in the Central European region was comparatively low, e.g., 8 % in the Czech Republic, 5.8% in Hungary, 4.8% in Poland, 3.6% in Slovakia and Croatia, 1.3% in Romania. (Eurostat 2020) Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis more than one in five young people across the EU failed to reach a basic level of digital skills. Furthermore, less than 40% of educators felt ready to use digital technologies in teaching, with wide differences across the Union (OECD 2018). A public consultation on the state of education (Eurostat 2020) showed that

almost 60% of the respondents had not used distance and online learning before the outbreak of the pandemic. 95% considered that the COVID-19 crisis marked a point of no return for the way technology was used in education and training. Respondents also said that online learning resources and content should be more relevant, interactive, and easy to use. Over 60% felt that they had improved their digital skills during the crisis and more than 50% of respondents wanted to improve their skills.

Respondents were also concerned about how to ensure access, equity, and inclusion in education. Their main concerns were about the emergence of digital divides. Persons living with disabilities also emphasized difficult issues that need to be addressed, such as the accessibility of technology and of digital educational materials; availability of supporting technology and staff as well as the teachers' competence in disability and accessibility matters. Providers in adult learning services saw a big number of students dropping out from courses, in some cases their share was up to 75% of the whole group. Respondents also reported that in some countries, regional and local governments provided digital equipment and tools to adult learners and providers. Although their assistance was helpful, these measures did not match the significant needs of the sector. Some providers had to stop all activities for several weeks and months, in particular when work-based learning required physical presence.

The EU ensures the necessary sources to support also civil organisations who are active in the macro-regions and at European level in their efforts to tackle new challenges through adult education. The Recovery Fund offers EU countries 750 billion EUR to finance actions in fields hit by the Covid-19 crisis, including adult education. Moreover, the new Erasmus programme and the EU Cohesion Policy for 2021-2027 grant more than 350 billion EUR to finance projects, among others in adult education.

Follow-up, proposals

Civil stakeholders in the Central European region need to create a platform to discuss new ideas and partnerships for elaborating innovative projects in adult education. The different EU funding sources for 2021-2027, e.g., ESI Funds and Interreg programmes within the Cohesion Policy, Erasmus, Horizon are suited for supporting such activities with a greater involvement of specialised civil organisations.

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