

# **EAEA and NVL Statement on Equality of Opportunities**

## **Learning to live with equal opportunities in Europe**

Equal Opportunities has become a mantra repeated by politicians. However, like so many other catch phrases, it runs the risk of becoming empty words. Across Europe, we continue to see the necessity of providing equal opportunities if we are to live and prosper together.

Research and common sense have proved that a decisive factor of social inequity is a lack of access to high quality education and learning opportunities. This has led us to the conviction that more equal access can reduce social inequities. Adult educators have a great responsibility in promoting this view.

### **A joined-up approach to adult learning policy.**

During the last five years we have seen a radical shift of focus in adult education towards a concentrated emphasis on basic skills provision. A critical reading of the policy texts, as well as an analysis of recent funding priorities, clearly show a strategy rooted more in a response to what is perceived as the skills demands of a knowledge economy for global competitiveness, rather than to issues of social inclusion and increased opportunities for lifelong learning.

In our view, adult learning policies should be inclusive of both priorities. They should secure sustainable economic growth alongside social cohesion and active citizenship.

We see a need to develop a better understanding of the scope of lifelong learning possibilities, inclusive in terms of gender, age, disability, sexuality, religious belief, level of education, ethnicity, economic status and life experience.

### **A good framework and a new adult learning wave in Europe**

The European Commission's Communication on Adult Learning entitled, 'It's never too late to learn!', from 2006 and the Action Plan on Adult Learning ('It's always a good time to learn', 27.9.2007) provide a good starting point. They include the indirect intention to place adult learning on the same level as other sectors of education and learning. This is an ambitious proposal which we fully support.

However, this will only work if we transform the vision into action. To do this properly we need dedicated financial resources. We suggest that adult education organisations formulate ambitious yet realistic national work programmes to achieve this.

Strong and coherent national implementation will form the basis of a new wave of adult education throughout Europe, and beyond. It should be based on the needs of the adult population, and it must be designed and built to provide equal opportunities for all.

The wider benefits of learning must be valued as highly as the development of vocational skills. These benefits include healthier and more self-confident individuals, with higher levels of self-motivation and communication skills at the personal level; alongside stronger families, safer communities and more active and informed citizens at the collective level.

### **From being a client to being a resource person and an active citizen**

Adult learning can also offer a second chance to those who enter adult age without any qualifications, in an effort to address the problem of the persistent high number of early school leavers. Adult learning can both improve people's skills and help them towards becoming active citizens and gaining personal autonomy. Adult learning can be seen as a tool to reduce the persistent problems of poverty and social exclusion among marginalised groups. It can increase the integration of migrants into society as well as the labour market. These are just some examples of the impact adult education can have on the development of society.

Equal opportunities and the role of learning in this context are about identifying and removing barriers; about inclusion and empowerment; self-determination and personal growth; about self-fulfilment and confident citizens and consumers; and about mutual respect and social cohesion.

### **The role of adult educators**

To sum it up, we can say that the challenge for the adult educator is to make all forms of learning equal, while attempting to improve the living conditions of adults. Putting the learner needs at the centre, adult educators should be able to choose the appropriate roles and tools to facilitate the process of self-development and self-realisation. The adult educator must become a counsellor, an adviser who supports people in accepting responsibility for reflecting on and improving their own competence and for their own personal development.

To achieve this there are many things we must improve. In the training of adult educators, emphasis has to be laid on familiarising educators with the ideas of equal opportunities in adult learning, using good practice to facilitate the adoption of these values. Adult education providers have to meet the varied needs of the individuals and respect the informal and non-formal learning they have acquired outside the formal educational system.

### **Specific recommendations for policy makers and practitioners**

#### **1. Listening to Learners**

A critical factor in our future success will be the willingness and ability to listen to what learners of all ages tell us about their learning goals and aspirations. Adult educators must be flexible in their approach; open-minded and supportive; working 'with' learners rather than 'for' them; and respecting them as adults.

#### **2. Intercultural Learning**

On the basis of the human rights to migrate and have access to education, intercultural learning has to be part of mainstream education. This should be backed by corresponding educational policies directed at both migrant and host populations. The intention should be to include rather than exclude people from different cultural backgrounds.

#### **3. Full and Active Citizenship**

To motivate everybody to understand what it means to be a full citizen, adult educators should provide suitable learning opportunities which respect learners' different needs. This will require a balance between integration and separation in the delivery of learning, so that individual and group needs can be met effectively. It will also demand that adult educators develop strategies to ensure that all voices are heard equally.

#### 4. **Consumer Education in the Context of Sustainability**

Consumer education should be integrated into lifelong learning strategies and programmes.

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) should lobby for sustainability education in all aspects of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

Adult educators should collaborate with other stakeholders such as the mass media to educate European citizens in the areas of consumer learning and sustainable development.

#### 5. **Learning and Living in an Inclusive and Diverse Society**

Adult educators should find tools and processes to empower learners to gain the knowledge and develop the skills necessary to succeed in an increasingly complex society and economy.

Adult educators should also consider how they can help organisations and institutions to become more inclusive by reflecting the communities they are intended to serve. Adult educators can assist authorities and institutions to value the benefits of working with a diverse population.

#### 6. **Gender Equality**

Adult educators and adult education agencies should campaign for a specific gender focus in policy making by networking at local, regional, national and global levels.

Adult educators and adult education agencies should ask questions about the distribution of resources among men and women and also ask which men and which women. Who is marginalised?

Adult educators and adult education agencies should reflect on gender differences in motivations for participating in adult learning in general and networks in particular.

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) should also refocus and reflect on gender issues ...

**European Association for the Education of Adults  
Nordic Network for Adult Learning  
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