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**Problem Solving in  
LifeLong Learning**

**Intellectual Output 3**

**Briefing Paper on:**

**COVID-19 pandemic as a  
problem-solving challenge in  
ALE: policy and  
organisational perspective**

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**Erasmus+**

## Project Partners

### Coordinator



### Partners



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## COVID-19 pandemic as a problem-solving challenge in ALE: policy and organisational perspective

### Introduction

Undeniably, COVID-19 is a major problem that needed to be addressed at different levels, both policy and practice. The pandemic changed learning provision overnight, requiring organisations, educators and learners to switch to a virtual learning and working environment. This was a task that many were unprepared for. More than ever, this also called for more advocacy for better support at the policy level.

At the same time, the pandemic only exacerbated existing problems: inadequate access to learning opportunities among those who need them most, such as marginalized adults; increasingly visible consequences of the climate crisis; or the urgent need to improve critical thinking and health literacy among the European population, to only name a few.

Undeniably, it will still require time and effort to fully analyse the consequences of the pandemic, not only for the European economy and society but also for the adult learning sector. First studies conducted after the pandemic started already show a worrying trend. It became apparent that **participation rates in adult learning and education started to decrease** (from 11.1% to 10.8% at the European level), even in countries where numbers tend to be very high, such as Estonia. This is also reflected in the need among adult learning providers to decrease their provision; for example in Switzerland, **the number of offers fell** by 20% during the COVID-19 pandemic. Across Europe, many providers have expressed a feeling of uncertainty and the difficulties to plan ahead.

In view of the above, the present briefing paper briefly summarizes how adult learning organisations approached the COVID-19 pandemic with a problem-solving mindset. It focuses specifically on the perspective on organisations as opposed to educators (which was covered in the briefing paper for IO1). The paper includes a set of case studies which showcase how adult learning providers approached problem-solving, focusing on the solutions they adopted. It also includes examples of how an enabling policy environment can support adult learning organisations in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. The paper ends with a set of recommendations targeting policymakers working at different levels.



## Case studies

### Addressing COVID-19 at the policy level

At the European level, several steps were taken at the policy level to address the fallout from the pandemic. The key example is the **Recovery and Resilience Facility**, set up in mid-2020 to help Member States mitigate the consequences of the health crisis.

Member States were asked to submit their Action Plans, outlining in which areas they would use the funding provided. As of March 2022, most of the plans have already been submitted and approved. Interestingly, several of them refer to the need for upskilling of adults, although most focus on the needs of the labour market.

Another example is the **European Skills Agenda**, which was published in July 2020. The document explicitly addresses the COVID-19 and the role of education and training to support adults in dealing with its consequences. This includes, for example, a focus on twin transitions, both digital and green, in a step towards achieving more sustainable societies. Importantly, the document also includes an action on Skills for Life, which is a measure to support European citizens in being better equipped in dealing with the challenges of daily life. Also the **new European Agenda for Adult Learning**, launched in November 2021, has a holistic approach to learning, including life skills.

In EU Member States, several policy initiatives were launched at the national level, in some cases as a result of advocacy activities carried out by civil society organisations. In **Finland**, adult learning providers received access to direct support for losses in income. Subsidies for adult learning providers were also offered in **Austria** and in **Sweden**. In many cases, the policy focus was predominantly on digitalisation. In **Germany**, adult learning organisations in the region of Baden-Württemberg received funding to facilitate the process of digitalising their learning provision; direct support to finance hardware was also made available in Ireland. Several strategies to support digitalisation were also rolled out, for example in **Latvia** and in **Cyprus**. In **Iceland**, new training programmes were launched to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis with a strong focus on employability.

That said, several countries did little to address the impact of COVID-19 on adult learning at the policy level. Such was the case in **Italy**, where adult education has and continues to have a marginal role on the Italian political agenda. According to the Italian partner of the SUPPORT project, the best actions have been taken at the level of organisations (third sector) that have been able to respond to people's needs in a much more effective and rapid manner.

### Addressing COVID-19 at the organisational level

Comprehensive measures to address the crisis were adopted by the **Austrian Adult Learning Centres Association** (VOEV). The association rapidly switched to an online environment and trained their educators on how to use it. It also provided low-cost Zoom licences to members. A repository with Open Educational Resources has also been established for the use of adult educators.



A similar approach was adopted by the **Association of Adult Learning Centres in Baden-Württemberg, Germany**. The association organised a training of trainers, based on the European Digital Competence Framework for Educators. The training addressed two levels: beginner and advanced, and focused on both basic training and demand-oriented specialisations. Similarly, **Prat Educació** in Barcelona, **Spain**, carried out a series of workshops to support teachers in moving their courses to an online environment.

Support for adult educators was also a key reaction of **AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation in Ireland**. Different capacity-building activities were organised, including online meetings with adult educators to discuss the challenges they face; AONTAS also prepared a set of well-being messages to help them approach the crisis. A repository of resources was also established to support them.

Some organisations provided care packages for learners. Such was the case in **Greece**, where **Dafni Kek** provided gift cards for learners that they could use in electronics shops, to help them cover the costs of the equipment necessary for online learning.

### Case study

A systemic approach to digitalisation at the organisational level was adopted by the Panevėžys Education Centre in Lithuania, who describes the process as follows:

- “1. We decided to focus on two online platforms: ZOOM and Microsoft Teams.
2. We formed two teams of two employees, who in a very short time (3-4 days) analyzed a specific online platform, prepared a practical training program and materials.
3. Other staff at the time organized groups of learners.
4. We carried out the first trainings about using ZOOM and the Microsoft Teams platform for our employees and specialists of other Lithuanian education centres so that they could also do trainings.
5. A week later, we started the first training for the entire adult audience. The work was very intense. Every day, four of our specialists conducted trainings for 3-5 groups each. During the first month of the pandemic, more than 4,000 adults from not only our city but all over the country took part in the practical trainings.
5. In parallel, training programmes and materials for other tools were developed after 2-3 weeks: Edmodo, Wordwall, Padlet, etc. Intensive training has started under these programs.
7. We periodically conducted short surveys to know the needs of adult learners and to receive feedback. Also we also held online meetings with of our staff at least twice



a week to let us know how we could help each other. We kept in touch with the messenger all the time.

8. We conducted online individual consultations on educational issues and mentoring.

9. We organized many online meetings with doctors, psychologists, public health professionals with the goal of helping overcome anxiety and tension .

8. In separate periods, when contact trainings for small groups were allowed, we organized these trainings, took care of the training premises and computer equipment.

9. The centre has a good computer base, so we were equipped about 50 adult learners with computers and tablets during the pandemic."

## Recommendations

Taking into account the above as well as the experience of SUPPORT project partners, the following recommendations are suggested to improve problem-solving in the face of a global crisis that affects adult learning and education.

1. Funding is a key issue; material support (e.g. to fund digital infrastructure) is important but **funding needs to be more sustainable and systemic**, less reactive. Available data shows that countries with state-funded ALE have had higher participation rates during the pandemic (cf Ellen Boeren)
2. COVID-19 **exacerbated existing issues**: barriers faced by disadvantaged learners, the digital divide, health literacy, the climate crisis. These need to be addressed at the policy level
3. Emerging problems related to COVID-19 and other major crises need to be solved together as they concern society as a whole. Adult learning providers and learners need to be **consulted**, wide **partnerships** (e.g. with social partners, municipalities) are needed
4. **Data collection** is key in addressing the impact of COVID-19 which is certain to be long-term.

## Resources

Inputs from partners (online questionnaire), available at request

[EAEA country reports 2021](#)

[EAEA statement on outreach and access during COVID-19](#)

[Recovery and Resilience Plans of Member States](#)

[Education and Training Monitor 2021](#)

[Results of the DigitALAD project](#)





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