

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS IN ADULT EDUCATION IN LATVIA: CASE STUDY OF THE ZEMGALE PLANNING REGION

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Abstract

Adult education is vital in a postmodern society; it allows not only to improve the individual's personality, but also to maintain competitiveness in the labour market. Latvia has not fulfilled its task in adult education - there is no umbrella law (Adult Education Law) in place that would allow for the planned organization of education in each Latvian municipality. The coordination of adult educators in each municipality differs, preventing interested individuals from developing and engaging in lifelong learning evenly. There is also a question about the financial aspect, about accessibility in terms of distance to the place of study, about the availability of tools for a quality training process. By learning, a person affects not only his own quality of life; he also affects the quality of life of the entire society. Adult education implies processes, structures, and institutions that are created to promote adult education. Research aim is to explore issues and solutions in adult education within the Zemgale planning region, in order to develop proposals for improving adult education from the perspective of stakeholders. The study, which took place in 2024, used qualitative research methods, focus group interviews with learners and semi-structured interviews with other stakeholders — Latvia's Adult Education Association and the agents from municipalities of the Zemgale planning region. The research concludes that the most widespread problem in adult education is a lack of strategy at all responsible levels, with main issues including coordination deficiencies among providers, difficulties in reaching the target audience due to logistical matters, and insufficient resources allocated to adult education. The results indicate that municipalities in the Zemgale planning region display significantly different models in the planning and organization of adult education processes in the districts, which leads to suboptimal use of local institutions for promoting adult education availability and long-term unbalanced approaches to adult education policy and management by sectors and regions, including the planning and implementation of European Union resource grants by state institutions not delegated to planning regions and municipal NGOs. The proposed solutions include better coordination at the regional level, strategic planning, and investment in adult education resources, as well as innovative approaches to engaging the community in adult education processes.

Keywords: *Adult education, adult education problems and solutions.*

1. Introduction

The time has come when adult learning is a very important social and economic factor in a person's life, as indicated by one of the research topics (Adult Education and Training in Europe, 2018). This factor is also very important for the social and economic development of local communities, municipalities, regions and countries.

Continuous learning can help citizens cope with future challenges, master the opportunities provided by digital challenges, joining the family of European countries, which have provided a place for citizens' education issues and an inclusive society in their planning documents. The situation with citizens' involvement in adult education processes is changing, as indicated by the data of surveys and various surveys in Latvia. Adult education policy planning documents distinguish between different types of education in which adults can participate, choosing it according to the purpose and possibilities. Lifelong education is based on a person's internal need and the necessity caused by external factors to acquire or supplement their knowledge base or develop skills. In the era of high technology and rapid development of science and technology, knowledge once acquired quickly becomes outdated. Purposefully planned education allows an individual to constantly improve their qualifications or even re-qualify, if such an opportunity is offered, and the learner can use a specific offer.

Within the framework of the research, the authors define adult education as follows: “Adult education is a diverse process of educating individuals that ensures personal development and competitiveness in the labour market throughout a person’s life” (Nacionala enciklopedija, 2022). Adult education refers to a diverse educational process for individuals aged 25 to 64, which ensures personal development and competitiveness in the labour market (Centrālā statistikas parvalde, 2023). This age is marked by active work, when an adult must engage in economic activities, without excluding the possibility of being socially active, getting involved in shaping the life of the community, society and the state, as well as taking care of their emotional, spiritual and mental health. “Adult education is a multidisciplinary process, the aim of which is to promote lifelong learning for all, as well as effective learning throughout life. Its aim is to provide knowledge that increases professional qualifications and to acquire civic, social, moral and cultural attitudes and skills for the performance of duties and progress in all areas of life” (Goņi, 2006).

In Latvia, adult education is organized in the formal and non-formal further education system, also providing for informal learning as an educational process, within which knowledge, competences, skills and values are acquired from everyday and work experience, which improve every individual. Unlike formal and non-formal education, informal learning is not included in the framework of a program or course. According to Articles 36 and 46 of the Education Law, adult education can be implemented in formal and non-formal education programs. The procedure for implementing formal adult education programs is determined by the norms of the Education Law, the Vocational Education Law and the Higher Education Law. Although all these laws stipulate the regulated activities of adult education and lifelong learning, the Adult Education Law is missing, which was being prepared some time ago and which would allow stipulating and regulating the norms of the law in one document (Izglītības likums, 1998).

Considering the goals set by the European Union for the involvement of many participants in adult education, the authors believe that Latvia has not fulfilled its task - there is no umbrella law (Adult Education Law) in place, which would allow for a systematic organization of the situation in each Latvian municipality. Each municipality differs in terms of the organization of adult education, accessibility and support in this field. Consequently, the coordination of adult educators in each municipality differs, which does not allow everyone interested to develop and engage in lifelong learning evenly. In addition, interest and understanding of the issue of lifelong education on the part of the population prevents improving the involvement of learners in the formal, non-formal or informal learning process. There is also an issue regarding the financial aspect, accessibility in terms of distance to the place of learning, and the availability of tools for a quality learning process. Thus, adult education means processes, structures and institutions that are created to promote and implement adult education.

Research aim is to explore issues and solutions in adult education within the Zemgale planning region, to develop proposals for improving adult education from the perspective of stakeholders.

The research questions raised in the article: what are the main social agents or stakeholders providing adult education? What are the main problems in adult education in Latvia and specifically in the Zemgale region? What are the current and necessary solutions from the perspective of the stakeholders to improve adult education in the Zemgale Planning Region?

2. Social agents involved in adult education

Stakeholder theory refers to a very broad set of groups, institutions, and individuals who are involved or have been involved in some way or are interested in the course of events or a process and want to steer it in their desired direction. The stakeholder approach allows for both conflict resolution and social tension reduction and can promote better cooperation and mutual understanding (Freeman, 2010; Pesqueux, 2005).

In Latvia, a few stakeholders interact in the field of adult education. The Department of Vocational and Adult Education of the Ministry of Education and Science develops policy, organizes and monitors the implementation of policy in the field of vocational education and adult education, as well as, in accordance with the competence of the department, exercises subordination over the institutions subordinate to the ministry: the State Education Content Centre, the State Education Quality Service and the State Education Development Agency. When examining the stakeholders involved in the regulatory framework, adult education implementers and policy implementers should be highlighted, who, by involving a part of society in educational processes, represent residents over the age of 25 and interested parties who want to obtain education for self-improvement to resolve employment issues, driven by the need for community growth or driven by interest. The stakeholders can be divided into three levels according to the scale of their functioning, power and influence: firstly, the state or national level stakeholder; secondly, the regional level stakeholder and the local level stakeholder. These levels indicate the context at which the parties involved operate. As a result of the analysis of empirical data, a typology of parties involved has been created,

consisting of seven types, and they are: policy makers and policy adopters; policy implementers; educational institutions; day centres, libraries, etc.; NGOs and their networks; entrepreneurs; individuals. For each party involved, its main functions have been considered, with the exception of municipalities, which are implementers of both national and local policies. An increasingly broader range of different stakeholders is involved in the teaching and learning process: non-governmental organisations, the private sector, various social groups, etc., to offer diverse learning opportunities, content and approaches, resources and technologies. Thus, new partnerships, networks and forms of cooperation are being formed between educational institutions and other parties involved, between the public and private sectors. An essential factor in this regard is targeted cooperation between general, vocational and higher education institutions, including by developing shared resources

3. Research methodology

The authors have chosen a qualitative research approach as their research approach, using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion methods.

Semi-structured interviews are effective when the research objectives include exploring diverse perspectives, identifying patterns and themes, and gaining insight into individuals' thoughts and emotions. In addition, this approach is valuable when researchers are seeking to establish connections and build collaborative relationships with participants, as it allows for meaningful and interactive conversations. The use of semi-structured interviews allows researchers to explore the wealth of participants' experiences while maintaining the versatility and adaptability of data collection (Salomao, 2023).

Fieldwork was conducted in March and April 2024, implementing a purposeful selection of available informants. Interviews were conducted both in person and online. Research ethics were observed during the interviews; all mentioned informants were informed about the objectives of the study and agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted with the Chairman of the Board of the Latvian Adult Education Association, a representative of the Zemgale Planning Region, and implementers of Adult Education policy in the municipalities of Zemgale municipalities - Aizkraukle, Bauska, Dobele, Jelgava - and the municipalities and policy implementers of Jekabpils municipalities and the city of Jelgava. During the interviews, it was possible to obtain information from specialists in municipalities responsible for adult education issues. The answers from the informants provided insight into how issues regarding adult education are organized in each municipality, how many employees are employed on this issue, what issues they are entrusted with, what target groups are worked with in the field of adult education, and what resources - municipal, state or EU funds - are attracted to address adult education issues.

On April 2, 2024, 2 focus group interviews (average length 30 minutes) were held at the Dobele Adult Education and Entrepreneurship Support Centre (PIUAC) with learners about adult involvement in educational processes and obstacles that hinder it. The main target groups of learners are employees of local governments and their institutions, entrepreneurs, working and unemployed people or job seekers, and seniors. In the focus group interviews, the informant focused on outlining personal experiences. The participants did not express their views on adult problems in general in the country or region, but expressed a vision based on their personal experience, which also allows the research to understand specific nuances faced by those involved in adult education.

4. Research results

Adult education activities in the municipalities of the Zemgale planning region are implemented in three ways, through Registered Learning Centres (Jelgava City Municipality and Dobele and Aizkraukle municipalities), through Lifelong Learning Centres (Jelgava Municipality) and education specialists in municipalities (Bauska and Jēkabpils Municipality). There are great differences between adult education centres, each of which has its own way and model of organizing adult education in its municipality. Here, we should also mention differences in the territorial sense, where the territory of a Latvia state cities differs from the territory of a municipality, which often combines several cities, villages and parishes (the problem is the accessibility of the population in terms of distance). Adult education centres have been reorganized over time, creating different models, for example, in some municipalities this task is delegated to the Education Board or the Education Department.

The analysis of interviews with stakeholders suggests that the biggest challenge for adult education policy makers and educators in regions and municipalities is to address the issue of greater citizen involvement in adult education, using all available tools and instruments. The advantage for engaging lower-paid and less educated citizens in learning processes lies with the organizers of adult education processes in local municipalities, as personal approach, feelings of security, presence and proximity to educational processes will lead to greater involvement in lifelong learning processes in every municipality

and region. Summarizing what the informants said, a lack of resources has been identified, both in terms of staff fully dedicated to adult education and financial resources specifically allocated to adult education initiatives. However, problems such as long distances in the region and transport problems significantly hinder participation and involvement in adult education.

Those involved in adult education from the local government side face problems in transferring information to their existing and potential clients daily. The closure of printed newspapers, the lack of computer skills and technical support do not contribute to obtaining information for improving one's knowledge. The focus group participants highlighted a similar problem from the client side - the lack of information in the adult education offer. At the Dobele PIUAC, where two focus groups were interviewed about adult education problems, the emphasis was placed directly on the inaccessibility of information. The cooperation of adult educators in the Dobele region as a network has not been established; here the centre's activities are focused on Dobele and Auce, where two training specialists work. As the representative of the Jelgava region municipality mentioned in the interview, the coordinator's duty in each parish is to inform their residents about adult education activities in the region. The head of the lifelong learning centre also emphasized the adult education culture as a problem, as non-existent, on which Latvia still needs to work very hard and diligently.

Informants point out several important aspects in their responses to the problems. For example, coordination between all parties involved in adult education should be improved, possibly with the leadership of the Zemgale Planning Region. This includes the creation of cooperation networks and, possibly, a dedicated position or team responsible for the development and monitoring of adult education throughout the region.

The head of the Lifelong Learning Department of the Jelgava Regional Education Board believes that it would not and is not possible to solve national problems at the municipal level; they should be left at the national level, but what the municipal authorities and the specialists working there can do is to directly address the residents "currently everything is based on personalities; we need a system of coordinators in the country - we need to go to the people. Until there is a culture of lifelong learning in the country, we need to go to the people, otherwise there will be nothing". In turn, representatives of the Dobele PIUAC and the Jelgava City Council believe that it is very important to work on public relations at both the municipal and national levels, talking about adult education, its importance in everyone's life in adulthood, so that a resident in every Latvian parish would think about and consider the need for education even after obtaining formal education (up to the age of 25). Information support is needed at all levels, from the state for popularizing adult education to adult education implementers in municipalities, so that every citizen has access to information about available educational offers, whether it is formal, non-formal or informal education; it is important to know about accessible, supportive, future-oriented education for adults, organized into a system for long-term operation in the future with clearly identified agents - policy makers, funders, education organizers and learners.

Focus group participants emphasize that they are happy to spend time in the evenings guided by their interests; in turn, when asked about training for work needs, they emphasize that they would rather attend such training during working hours. Unfortunately, the interest of employees in attending courses during working hours does not always coincide with the opportunities to attend them, especially if these courses offer to study another field that could be useful to residents in the future, for example, when creating their own economic activity. Focus group participants emphasize that it is very important to attend courses and seminars as close as possible to their place of residence. A very important prerequisite is to receive information about possible training offers, and a very important aspect is the financial aspect, although they point out that if this arena of education is of great interest, the financing aspect is not crucial.

5. Conclusions and proposals

The Education Law and various policy planning documents regulate adult education in Latvia, but they do not ensure a sustainable connection with the parties involved in adult education and the general needs of society.

Participation in adult education is determined by several factors, such as previous education, employment status, profession, age and developed skills. Adults with low or no education, low-skilled workers, the unemployed, seniors are reluctant to participate in lifelong learning. Given that participation in adult education processes is often not possible for adults in this category, the goal remains unfulfilled for those who would need these operations the most.

There is cooperation between the various stakeholders, but coordination could be more effective and with a greater role for the Zemgale planning region in coordinating activities in adult education.

One of the most important problems is reaching and engaging people in educational activities. Information dissemination methods, such as websites and advertisements in newspapers, often have a low

level of effectiveness. Often, a more effective approach is cooperation with libraries, day care centres and direct communication with the target audience.

Projects using European Union funds play a crucial role in providing adult education. However, there is a need for more stable and long-term funding sources to ensure the sustainability of adult education programmes.

There is no law regulating adult education in Latvia; therefore, a sustainable adult education system has not been implemented that would define the division of responsibility and coordination between the ministries involved, the financing procedure from the state and local government budgets for the provision of human resources and teaching aids for the long-term development of adult education.

In the issue of adult education, large differences have been observed between the municipalities of the Zemgale planning region in the understanding of this area and in the provision of adult education to improve the skills necessary for residents close to their place of residence. The absence of a system in Latvia in the development of the adult education area has not led to the planned development and involvement of residents in adult education activities.

The Ministry of Education and Science, as the leading state administrative institution in the fields of education, science, space and sports, as well as in the field of youth and state language policy, must develop an Adult Education Law with a long-term strategy for the formation of adult policy in Latvia, providing for responsibility for the administration of adult education, coordination between the ministries involved, the definition of adult education priorities and the provision of funding in the state and local government budgets, including monitoring of the effective use of resources.

Planning regions and municipalities, for sustainable access to adult education for residents, must establish a coordination and cooperation network, focusing on a balanced sectoral and territorial approach, involving local libraries, educational institutions, day centres and other institutions in the municipality in providing adult education.

To solve the problem, the Ministry of Education and Science, when developing the Adult Education Law, should provide for long-term funding in the state and local government budgets, with a defined delegation of tasks for the provision of adult education in educational institutions at all levels, also providing for monitoring the quality of adult education.

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