

EAEA YOUNGER STAFF TRAINING AS A LEARNING JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT: The EAEA Younger Staff Training is a good example of a successful initiative that encourages the professional development of adult education staff, builds new collaborations, and explores the diversity of policy and practice in adult learning in Europe. Organized annually since 2011, the training programme has undergone several modifications over the years to adapt to the changing needs of adult education professionals. The paper looks at the content and structure of the programme, with specific attention to how these have evolved and the rationale behind the changes. It also briefly describes why the training programme continues to be successful and its benefits for both the participants and the organizers.

1. The role of the European Association for the Education of Adults

In a field marked by diverse occupational profiles, with frequently little recognition at the policy level and consequently inadequate funding, what can be done at the European level to support adult education professionals in their work? How can adult education staff be encouraged to learn from the diversity of practice in Europe, and ultimately to improve their practice – be it as an adult educator, project manager, or communication officer? These are the questions that have been on the agenda of EAEA from its early days, as the association recognized the need for more opportunities for professional development for adult education professionals and capacity-building for adult education organizations.

Since 2011, the European Association for the Education of Adults has been organizing the EAEA Younger Staff Training (YST), which targets staff working in adult education organizations with relatively little experience. As an umbrella organization representing 130 organizations in 44 countries, EAEA aims at impacting EU policies on non-formal adult education and lifelong learning by cooperating with EU institutions as well as civil society organizations, project partners, and other stakeholders on the international, European, and national level.

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Another EAEA objective is to provide opportunities for training and networking, of which Younger Staff Training is a flagship example. Participant feedback shows that the course was a valuable experience for them, introduced them to EU initiatives in adult education, the diversity of policy and practice across the continent, and encouraged networking with like-minded professionals. At the same time, designing and carrying out the training programme has been a learning journey for the EAEA as an organization as well, allowing the staff to adapt to changes, to respond to new challenges, and to reflect on their expertise and role as a European umbrella organization in the process.

2. Professional development as a persisting challenge

As widely discussed in the academic literature (Bron & Jarvis, 2008; Przybylska, 2008; Nuissl, 2009), professionalism and professional development in the field of adult education are challenging topics to explore. As highlighted in the CONFINTEA VI Mid-Term Review for Europe and North America (Kozyra, Motschilnig & Ebner, 2017), there is a variety of educational pathways that can lead to work in the field, with no clear view of the profile of competencies required from adult learning staff to fulfil their professional tasks. Often individuals working in adult education do not even have a specific educational background in the field, but rather have gained experience in different fields and start working in adult education at later stages of their career.

This presumably comes from the predisposition or common belief that adult education mainly means teaching, whereas in reality, as observed in Nuissl (2009), it includes a broader range of concepts. According to Nuissl, counselling and guidance, media, programme planning, and support to both leaders and teachers are part of the concept of adult education.

As observed in Przybylska (2008), initiatives that are aimed at a standardization of professional qualifications and training in the field of adult education have not yet reached their goal. Those working or planning to work in adult education still have a variety of choices of professional development, from non-formal training courses to academic degrees. In most cases, there is no single pathway to follow; it is up to the individual to choose what best reflects their professional needs and career aspirations. In some countries, those interested in obtaining qualifications as adult educators might find it difficult to find programmes or courses that would offer initial education and training, with in-service programmes more readily available (Milana, 2010).

Few adult education professionals work in the field full time; most are employed on a part-time basis, or as freelancers, which, worryingly, might

leave them in precarious employment situations (Kozyra, Motschilnig & Ebner, 2017). Figures from the GRALE III monitoring survey (2016:58) report that while 81 per cent of the 134 countries offer initial pre-service education and training programmes for adult education staff, globally only 31 per cent of the respondent countries have in-service continuing professional development with sufficient capacity.

With these challenges in mind, EAEA launched an annual training programme in 2011 aiming to support younger staff in their professional development and to ultimately build a network of young European professionals in adult education. 2011 was a momentous year for the adult education sector in Europe: The European Agenda for Adult Learning (European Commission, 2011) had just been launched and placed within the larger scope of the Education and Training 2020 framework (European Commission, 2009). Participation rates in mobility schemes of the Grundtvig action under the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007–2013) had been steadily on the rise (EAEA, 2018). As a European Association, EAEA felt that it was the right time to launch a training programme that would focus on the European dimension of adult education and lifelong learning.

3. Reaching adult education staff: Defining target groups and formats

One of the key challenges we initially faced was defining our target groups. In a field to which some professionals turn having already acquired experience in another area, who exactly could be considered ‘younger’ staff? To also accommodate those participants who started working in adult education later in their career, we first set the age limit at 40. However, with time and after Younger Staff Training had been in place for several years, we scrapped the age limit altogether; instead, we encourage the participation of those who have only worked in adult education for a maximum of five years.

Our target group – ‘younger staff in adult education’ – was intentionally broad and supposed to represent the variety of professions in the field described earlier. Our participants might be project or programme managers, communication planners, or staff working primarily on policy and advocacy. This also reflects the fact that adult education organizations in Europe might work on multiple levels: some locally as adult learning providers, nationally or regionally as umbrella organizations, others as research institutes or communication hubs. As one of the primary objectives of the training programme has been to showcase the diversity of the field, we have always considered it an advantage to bring together staff working in different capacities and who might, in turn, have very different perspectives and expertise.

Understandably, this brings another challenge: what should the programme's focus be to make it relevant for adult education professionals with diverse roles in their organizations, or working at different levels? Starting with the principle that everyone working in the field can and should be an advocate for adult education, and taking into account the emergence of new EU strategies for adult education in the early 2010s, the syllabus of the first editions was designed around key European initiatives in adult education and lifelong learning, as well as the roles of European institutions and civil society in improving the sector across the continent.

Consequently, getting insights into the European institutions and how they work and meeting key stakeholders in lifelong learning at the EU level were key elements of the programme, which is why the training venue was established in Brussels, where EAEA is based. Participants visited the European Parliament and the European Council, they met with representatives of the Adult Learning Unit at the European Commission and with Members of the European Parliament who sit on the Culture and Education (CULT) Committee. They were also introduced to the work of EAEA as well as other civil society organizations in the field of lifelong learning, such as the Lifelong Learning Platform. In some years, they also got a chance to participate in policy debates and other events of Lifelong Learning Week, a Brussels-based civil society initiative.

What played an equally important role was the exchange between participants on adult education structures, policies, and practices that exist in their countries. Called 'Adult education in my country', these discussions highlighted the structural differences in different geographical contexts, but also common challenges, encouraging peer learning in a comfortable environment. The combination of different modes of delivery – inputs, study visits, and peer-learning sessions – was crucial to the success of the course.

4. Adapting to the changing context

After three successful editions, some challenges began to emerge. Launching a pan-European call for participants started to prove challenging. Generally speaking, with the adult education sector remaining grossly underfunded (EAEA, 2017), few organizations can afford to send staff members to locally-based training programmes, let alone to an international one. Funding opportunities for staff mobility, while available, have eventually become more difficult to access.

In-service Grundtvig training, offered under the Lifelong Learning Programme until 2013, made the application process relatively easy: participants could directly apply for funding to participate in a training

course that interested them. Funding rules changed when the programme was merged with Erasmus under the common title of Erasmus+: to participate in foreign mobility, organizations now have to apply for funding as part of a larger application, detailing aims and objectives, planned dissemination or sharing the knowledge within the organization. The deadlines have also become strict: National Agencies accept applications until early February and only organize an additional round in the autumn if there is still funding available (European Commission, 2015). New rules implied that most organizations needed a certain amount of time to adjust, and especially to learn how to structure a fully-fledged application and explain their motivation to be able to receive the funding. While many organizations did eventually become more skilled and successful in applying for Erasmus+ KA1 mobility, some EAEA members report that they lack staff resources to take on the lengthy task of drafting an application (EAEA, 2018).

This had far-reaching consequences on the number of Younger Staff Training applications, which sharply decreased after Erasmus+ was launched in 2014. The terrorist threat in Belgium around that time had its impact as well, and having previously hosted 20 participants for each edition, in 2016 we found ourselves cancelling the programme due to insufficient interest.

With capacity-building remaining central to EAEA activities, giving up on Younger Staff Training altogether was out of the question; however, given the above-mentioned challenges and the continuously changing landscape of adult education, adjustments had to be made. This is why in early 2017 we decided to remodel the programme, restructuring it to have a different focus each day. Having carefully looked into our expertise, and at what might potentially be useful for younger staff in adult education (based, among others, on the feedback that we received from our members), in 2017 we built the four-day training course around the following topics: policy and advocacy, communication and outreach.

We also found it was becoming more and more important to include a session that would support participants in writing project applications. As reported in Nuissl (2009), management activities such as fundraising, project management, and building of cooperation networks have become increasingly relevant for many adult education contexts and actors. The results of the FinALE project (2018) confirm this observation, reporting that programme and project funding are among the main funding tools that support adult education, making it relevant for staff working for adult education providers and organizations to have some knowledge and awareness related to funding tools.

Having also introduced a new communication strategy for the training course, timed around the Erasmus+ KA1 application period, with a new visual identity and increased use of social media to target younger

audiences, our attempts to remodel the programme proved to be successful: we received over 20 applications. With the new format having ultimately worked well in practice, we decided to keep it for the foreseeable future, with some modifications introduced when planning each edition. For example, the themes for each day slightly change every year, depending on our strategic focus (every year EAEA adopts an ‘annual theme’) and also on what we found worked best – or could be improved – compared to the previous year.

A few elements, however, remain unchanged: we start the course by dedicating half a day to getting to know each other, discussing expectations and common topics of interest; in a similar vein, the last day is focused on reflecting on the training programme, building new contacts, and discussing future cooperation. The second day is organized around European policy and advocacy, as we found that regardless of the level at which participants are working, it helps to put their working context into a larger picture. While the focus of the other two days might differ – in past years, we discussed successful communication strategies, outreach, or life skills – we tend to keep a similar structure for each day, and we work increasingly on sequencing the content. We start with a peer-learning ‘adult education in my country’ session – whose focus depends on the theme of the day – followed by an input session and a workshop.

A good example of this structure is perhaps the day during which we focus on policy and advocacy. We lay the foundations for policy discussions during the ‘Adult education in my country’ sessions by asking participants to reflect on the priorities of adult education policies in their countries, on the overall recognition of the sector at the policy level, and the role of civil society in policy development. This frequently helps to set the scene: while in some cases policy priorities might be different across the represented countries, in others we can already distinguish certain parallels, for example an increasing focus on basic skills. Over the past few years, the input has been provided by a representative of the Adult Learning Unit at the European Commission, who presents European policy frameworks and initiatives on adult learning; a civil society perspective is provided by EAEA. The last part of the day is dedicated to supporting participants in making their voice heard about the importance of adult education at the policy level: through a hands-on workshop delivered by our policy officer, participants can get insights into the steps to good advocacy and practice planning their own campaign.

This structure has proved to be appreciated by participants; results of the evaluations in 2017 and 2018 showed that the content was organized logically and was relatively easy to follow. What seems to work particularly well is the addition of practical workshops – participants appreciate being given the time and guidance to work on their own ideas, such as an advocacy campaign – as well as the use of interactive methods through-

out the programme: working in small groups, ice-breaking activities, and energizers. This approach contributes towards the main goal of the course, which is not only to increase participants' knowledge on policies and practices in adult education at the European level but ultimately to establish a community of practice.

5. What participants think: Taking feedback into account

What has remained unchanged since the very first edition of the training programme is the key role of regular feedback from participants. A feedback session is always included mid-way through the course; it is organized as an open discussion with the participants on what they enjoyed most and what changes, if any, they would like to see in the coming days. As most of the sessions are delivered by EAEA staff, there is always room for adjusting the course: in past years, we added more breaks and energizers when needed and adapted one of the morning discussions to include some topics of interest that had emerged.

While initial reactions at the end of the course remain important – we ask for short written feedback in addition to small-group discussions about immediate impressions – since 2017 we have also included a slightly more detailed evaluation form, which is shared online one month after the programme, giving participants some time to reflect on what was most successful and what could still be improved. Admittedly, we added the extra evaluation form with some concern over whether many participants would take the time to complete it; we were surprised to find that almost all of them submitted a reply.

The feedback that we received has been overwhelmingly positive (both in 2017 and in 2018, all of the respondents were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the course); nevertheless, we were also offered a few suggestions for improvement, which we always welcomed and used later on to adjust the programme. Most notably, we made certain changes to the schedule of the sessions, eventually extending the programme to five days. We also dedicated more attention to some elements that proved successful, such as visits to local adult education providers.

6. Impact and the way ahead

While the evaluations we carried out after each edition have shown that it was a positive, instructive, and enjoyable experience for our participants, gathering long-term results is far from easy. Part of the difficulty comes from the fact that some of the participants of the earlier editions no longer work for their sending organizations and are thus more diffi-

cult to reach. Although we are yet to conduct a more structured follow-up with former participants, we have learnt informally that some stayed in touch and later developed projects together or hosted each other for study visits. Many joined the online Younger Staff community to continue the exchange. Some went on to become vocal and well-established adult education advocates; two of the first-year participants were eventually elected to the EAEA Executive Board; one of them is now on the Steering Committee of the Lifelong Learning Platform.

From an organizational point of view, preparing – and remodelling – the programme has also proven to be an interesting, challenging, and ultimately beneficial experience for us as a team. We start planning each edition together, from discussing practical things – such as the date – to reflecting on the previous year and possible changes to the programme. While the membership and events officer is in charge of the overall coordination, from drafting and finalizing the programme, staying in touch with participants to carrying out evaluations, other team members also play an important role, for example by leading some of the training sessions. Working together has certainly been crucial for the programme to succeed.

Our positive experiences with Younger Staff Training have also encouraged us to experiment with other formats. Between 2014 and 2016, we organized a series of training sessions online within the framework of the European Adult Education (Young) Professionals Learning Platform (AE-PRO), a Grundtvig multilateral project. Marked by high completion rates and participant engagement, the online course also proved to be successful (Ebner & Berman, 2016). Upon popular demand, we launched a follow-up Erasmus+ project, Upskilling Pathways in AE-PRO (2018–2020). We also started preparing our first Senior Staff Training, to be launched in 2020. This will certainly come with other challenges on the way, but we are looking forward to confronting them.

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