

Chapter # 7

ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN LATVIA: Case study of the Zemgale planning region

Ginta Kronberga & Monta Mantrova

*Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies;
Dobele Adult Education and Entrepreneurship Support Centre, Latvia*

ABSTRACT

Adult education and training are vital in a postmodern society; they allow not only to improve an individual's personality but also to maintain competitiveness in the labour market. The research aim is to explore issues and solutions in adult education and training within the Zemgale planning region in Latvia. The research concludes that the most widespread problem in adult education and training 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 and training. The results indicate that municipalities display significantly different models in the planning and organization of adult education and training processes, which leads to suboptimal use of local institutions for promoting adult education and training availability and long-term unbalanced approaches to adult education and training 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 and training resources, as well as innovative approaches to engaging the community.

Keywords: adult education and training, adult education and training problems and solutions.

1. INTRODUCTION -THE IMPORTANCE OF ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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 (European Commission, 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 and join 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 and training processes is changing, as indicated by the data from surveys and various surveys in Latvia. Adult education and training 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 and training as follows: “Adult education and training is a diverse process of educating individuals that ensures personal development and competitiveness in the labour market throughout a person’s life” (Nacionālā enciklopēdija, 2022). Adult education and training refer to a diverse educational process for individuals aged 25 to 64, which ensures personal development and competitiveness in the labour market (Centrālā statistikas pārvalde, 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. The EU uses the term “adult education and training” in connection with the fundamental articles of the Maastricht Treaty. This emphasizes the importance of teaching and vocational education beyond general education. Adult education is one way to address current and future challenges. Adult education must be developed and improved to enhance democracy, social solidarity and ecological transformation (Nuissl, Sava, & Farkas, 2024). Adult education can also continue or extend initial education obtained at a general education or vocational education institution, or at a higher education institution. Adult education and training are a process that aims to promote lifelong learning for all, as well as effective learning throughout life (to rise achievement in basic skills, professional qualification, employment training and informal education) to acquire civic, social, moral and cultural attitudes and skills for the performance of duties and progress in all areas of life (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023; <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu>).

In Latvia, adult education and training are 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 and training 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 and training, 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 and training, 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 prevent 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 and training means processes, structures and institutions that are created to promote and implement adult education and training.

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

The research questions raised in the article: what are the main social agents or stakeholders providing adult education and training? What are the main problems in adult education and training 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 and training in the Zemgale Planning Region?

There are five planning regions in Latvia. Zemgale Planning Region is located in the central part of Latvia and borders all other planning regions. In general, adult education and training in the regions of Latvia is organized in a similar way as in Zemgale.

2. SOCIAL AGENTS INVOLVED IN ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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 and training. 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 and training, 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 and training 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. 8 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; there was no coercion in recruitment, the right to withdraw, data confidentiality, etc. 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 and Training policy in the municipalities of Zemgale - 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 and training 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 training, and what resources - municipal, state or EU funds - are attracted to address adult education and training 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 first focus group had 9 participants and the second had 12 and were selected using a purposive sampling method, informants represented a diversity of viewpoints. 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 informants 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 and training.

4. CASE STUDY OF THE ZEMGALE PLANNING REGION

4.1. Key Stakeholders in Adult Education and Training

Each stakeholder has its main functions taken into account, with the exception of municipalities, which are both national and local policy implementers. Adult education and training 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 and training centres, each of which has its own way and

model of organizing adult education and training in its municipality. Here, we should also mention differences in the territorial sense, where the territory of a Latvian state city 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 and training 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.

Even though there are various examples of cooperation, for example, between municipalities and educational institutions, a coordinated approach that would bring together different agents and resources in the field of adult education and training is often missing. Funding is one of the main problems, especially in relation to the need for new educational projects and the development of programs.

4.2. The Main Problems in Adult Education and Training

A problem that affects not only Latvia is the number of adults with low levels of digital skills or no digital skills at all. Education and Training Monitor in 2024 shows that only 51% of the adult population (16-74 years) in Latvia possesses basic digital skills. This places Latvia significantly below the EU average. The question is about the accessibility of these residents, both in terms of information transfer and education: initially, these residents must be motivated to engage in learning, because without motivation and a clear goal, why do I need it? - It will not be possible to involve these residents in any AE processes. Unfortunately, studies have proven that people with an initially lower level of education, without education, the unemployed, and seniors are reluctant to resume or start education (Laskova & Brokane, 2013; Education and Training Monitor 2024).

The absence of a single institution responsible for adult education and training as a whole is mentioned as a problem in Latvia. *"We do not have a law on adult education, and therefore these responsibilities are split: adult education and training is dealt with by the Ministry of Economics, and in some way by the Ministry of Education and Science, and in some way by the Ministry of Regional Development, Regional Planning and Regional Development, and municipalities"* (Head of the Lifelong Education Department of Jelgava Municipality). The interviews revealed a very different picture in each municipality of Zemgale, where the authors of the paper conducted interviews. The Zemgale planning region includes 6 municipalities with 5 counties and 1 city of national importance. In each municipality, the provision of adult education and training has been organized very differently over the past 20 years. If in one of the municipalities it is maintained and developed in the form of adult education and training centers, then in another, the workload of the adult education coordinator is included with a very small % in the workload of some other position.

The analysis of interviews with stakeholders suggests that the biggest challenge for adult education and training policy makers and educators in regions and municipalities is to address the issue of greater citizen involvement in adult education and training, using all available tools and instruments. The advantage of engaging lower-paid and less educated citizens in learning processes lies with the organizers of adult education and training 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 training and financial resources specifically allocated to adult education and training initiatives. However, problems such as long distances in the region and transport problems

significantly hinder participation and involvement in adult education.

“... my vision and experience - smart are those municipalities that provide and establish an adult education and training center, because it is a tool by which the municipality can achieve and promote all its strategic development plans, because the basis of the development of all things is education and information”. Those involved in adult education and training 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 and training offer. At the Dobeles PIUAC, where two focus groups were interviewed about adult education and training problems, the emphasis was placed directly on the inaccessibility of information. The cooperation of adult educators in the Dobeles region as a network has not been established; here, the centre's activities are focused on Dobeles 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 and training activities in the region. The head of the lifelong learning centre also emphasized the adult education and training 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 and training 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 and training throughout the region.

Table 1.
Main problems in adult education in Latvia and specifically in the Zemgale Planning Region.

Problem	Solutions	Benefits
Unorganized system at the national level	Development and implementation of the Adult Education Law	Financing of adult education and training in the state and local government budgets in the long term. Development of the adult education and training sector after the end of European Union funds support.
Lack of coordination of adult education and training	Involvement of the Zemgale planning region in the distribution of funding and coordination of adult education and training	A common understanding of adult education and training at all levels: national, regional and local. Attracting funding, for example through various projects, and coordinating its distribution, taking into account the specific needs of the region.
Lack of coordination	Involvement of the Zemgale planning region in the creation of cooperation and the development of adult education and training	The overall development vision of the Zemgale planning region for the development of adult education and training in Zemgale. Cooperation with entrepreneurs to ensure their current needs - by educating the workforce, etc. ensuring professional development. Creation of cooperation networks in each municipality, county and region, involving various interested parties in cooperation.

Problem	Solutions	Benefits
Lack of information	Involvement of all interested agents in the preparation and dissemination of information	Accessibility of adult education and training to everyone interested. Informing employers about opportunities for employees in the field of adult education and training.
Popularization of adult education and training	Popularization of the field of adult education and training at the national level, involving the media	Strengthening the importance of adult education among policy makers, adult education and training implementers, local government representatives and residents. The importance of adult education and training in the field of professional and personal growth among both residents and employers.

Source: Created by the authors based on interview and focus group analysis

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 Dobeles 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 and training, 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 and training to adult education and training 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. *“Well, the biggest challenge was to address people. Of course, as we decided, we put those posters and advertisements on the websites, very beautiful with all the pictures, and beautiful names, and explanation's what those computer courses mean, and how long they will be, and how to apply, and so on... - that poster stood on my website for a month, no calls, no nothing”*.

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

For the provision of adult education and training and the involvement of adults in it, it is very important to ensure all possible ways from the state in the development of regulatory enactments, attracting funding and providing adult education and training. A very important factor here is also the involvement of adults themselves, the promotion of a culture of lifelong learning, starting at the national level, and at the very foundation, to highlight the value of education already initially in the family circle. It is important to teach learning by continuing it in the school environment: pre-school, primary school, secondary school and later stages of education. Research has confirmed that lifelong learning of an individual contributes to higher self-esteem, further education for adults and access to adult education and training opportunities for those who have already received a better education initially. At present, it is necessary to stop thinking about a vocational or higher education institution as a final place of education; now society must understand that adult education and lifelong learning are a normal, unchanging dimension of all human life; that is why it is necessary to create an adult education and training system that ensures the transition of adults from youth education to adult education and training.

The Education Law and various policy planning documents regulate adult education and training 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 and training 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 and seniors are reluctant to participate in lifelong learning. Given that adult participation in 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 and training.

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 and training. However, there is a need for more stable and long-term funding sources to ensure the sustainability of adult education and training programmes.

There is no law regulating adult education and training in Latvia; therefore, a sustainable adult education and training 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 and training.

In the issue of adult education and training, 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 and training 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 and training area has not led to the planned development and involvement of residents in adult education and training 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 and training, coordination between the ministries involved, the definition of adult education and training 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 and training for residents, must establish a coordination and cooperation network, focusing on a balanced sectoral and territorial approach, involving local libraries, educational institutions, day centers and other institutions in the municipality in providing adult education and training.

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 and training in educational institutions at all levels, also providing for monitoring the quality of adult education and training.

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AUTHORS' INFORMATION

Full name: Ginta Kronberga

Institutional affiliation: Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies

Institutional address: Liela street 2, Jelgava, LV 3001, Latvia

Short biographical sketch: Dr.sc.soc., Assoc. prof. at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies. Director of the academic bachelor study programme "Sociology of Organisations and Public Administration". Research interests include societal development, learning environment and aspects of teachers' working lives, youth-related aspects.

Full name: Monta Mantrova

Institutional affiliation: Dobeles Adult Education and Entrepreneurship Support Centre

Institutional address: Brīvības street 7, Dobele, LV 3701, Latvia

Short biographical sketch: Head of Dobeles Adult Education and Entrepreneurship Support Centre, master's degree in "Sociology of Organisations and Public Administration". Research interests include adult education and stakeholders' cooperation in different projects.