

Reaching out to specific groups: what tools, partners, finances?

Peer Learning Activity for national coordinators for adult learning

On 15-16 September 2020, we organised the PLA for national coordinators for adult learning, on 'Reaching out to specific groups: what tools, partners, finances?' The plan was that Slovenia would host the PLA in May, during the Slovenian Lifelong Learning Week. While the Lifelong Learning Week went ahead in September, respecting social distancing rules, the PLA moved online and was organised back to back with an adult learning colloquium that formed part of the events of the Week.

*The group of national coordinators for whom awareness raising, outreach and guidance, are a priority in their work programmes (ES, IS, LI, PL, RO, SI, SK, TR), put the PLA programme together and presented good practice examples from their policies and initiatives. **Reaching people where they work** was an important topic in the Slovene, Icelandic and Polish presentations. A common issue that emerged was the challenge posed for guidance counsellors and educators alike when taking their activities into companies. It was agreed that this requires a change of mind-set and specific skills not regularly part of their initial training as guidance counsellors, teachers or trainers. This mind-set change means that they have to go out in search of clients, and they have to go into the companies, negotiate with employers and market their services, as a salesperson would. In Iceland, companies can borrow a training planner, paid for partially through the VET funds to which they contribute. **Continuing professional development** is required to prepare staff to take on this role. However, this is only one reason for acquiring new skills, their profession is constantly changing as is their working environment. All countries presenting explained how they were obliged to digitalise their services, this was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and is work that continues.*

*National Coordinators for Adult Learning have a particular focus on supporting low skilled and low qualified adults who often have **deficits in their basic skills**. Furthermore, this is the group that needs specific attention in terms of outreach. Slovakia and Spain therefore describe measures to develop frameworks for delivering basic skills that have guidance built into them. The **regional/local dimension** emerges as an important factor in reaching out to specific groups as evidenced in the examples from Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia and indeed all examples.*

Slovenia has a well-established network of 17 guidance centres, attached to folk high-schools throughout the country's 14 regions. They cater for the local needs of various adult target groups. However, this in itself is not enough, outreach activity outside the centres is necessary to attract people in.

A planned approach to outreach is part of work in guidance centre: planning the percentage of work hour; different approaches for different target groups and goals; sufficient number of counsellors; trained counsellors for outreach work; financial resources; partnership and cooperation in local community; monitoring and evaluation. The guidance centre have outreach units, so-called »permanent outdoor locations« that provide a mobile guidance service: guidance at the workplace, in Roma villages, in prisons etc.

Special promotional campaigns are organised at the national level. Guidance Days take place at the centres each year in September. On 24 September 2020, an additional “Knowledge Day” was organised in collaboration with the trade unions to promote lifelong learning for employees. The presence of the counsellors at local community events and in different communities is emphasised. Information points in public places are set up on a permanent or occasional basis.

Since the onset of the COVID19 pandemic, online counselling (from a distance) is being developed as an outreach approach: promoting and informing (with information on web pages, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) and counselling (through digital media). This is still work in progress that is exploring the suitability of working environments and digital tools, as well as the readiness of counsellors.

Due to the demographic development and the increasing requirements resulting from digitalisation and globalisation, companies are increasingly being forced to use their endogenous potential and to further qualify their employees - including their less qualified employees. The workplace is not the traditional teaching environment for adult educators. Adult educators and programme managers are entering new territory when offering basic skills training to employees, for which they need specific skills, professional support and appropriate tools.

PIAAC results in Slovenia highlighted the prevalence of low level of basic skills in the workforce, in particular among older employees. Many steps have been taken to improve the situation, in particular through ESF-funded projects that target the vocational competences of low-skilled workers and legislation is in place. However, going into the workplace to provide basic skills was a new departure, and although it was not common practice in Slovenia, experience in other countries showed that it was an effective way to reach low-qualified adults and an environment conducive to their learning.

Profi –Train Professional development of staff working on outreach to low skilled employees was an Erasmus+ project led by Slovenia. It set out to develop professional development programmes for adult educators implementing work-based basic skills, and to achieve the following outcomes:

For adult education professionals: reach out to target groups among employees who are usually hard-to-reach; know how to work with open and often company-specific concepts and conditions; know how to design teaching/learning for work specific situations; develop a strong sense of professional identity.

For low qualified employees: offer experiential learning, which is useful to overcome barriers to participation in learning.

For companies: perceive measurable increase in competitiveness; perceive work-based basic skills as an important strategic component.

For training organisations: sustain and/or enlarge their offers, and be better at reaching companies.

Because of the project, Slovenia now has its own programme for the professional development of educators who will work with employees in companies. As well as boosting outreach and teaching skills, it develops educator proficiency in using a tool developed with OECD to assess the basic skills of low-qualified people.

In **Iceland**, there is also emphasis on reaching out to employees. As employment rates in Iceland are high and people find it difficult to leave their place of work for further training, it is necessary to take the training to them. The sparse population in the rural areas makes it difficult to offer training to larger groups simultaneously, creating a need for many smaller groups or individual training. Online training is growing exponentially, as it is easily accessible and available at low cost.

IDAN - The Education and Training Service Centre - reaches out to companies by providing assessments of their skills needs. Given the changing employment landscape, different jobs are analysed and “job profiles” are created. The skills needed for each job are analysed with a focus group. Job profiles are then processed to develop validation tools and curricula. Individual small and medium-sized companies can apply for the service of a training manager who assesses their overall training needs. Different Vocational Training Funds finance the initiative, which is free to the companies. This usually takes 2-4 weeks but can be longer or shorter, depending on the size of the company. The Training Planner analyses the training needs of each company and suggests a training plan, which is implemented by the company. Training costs are partly covered by Vocational Training Funds owned by the social partners and financed through levies on salary. In certain sectors, for example tourism, several training providers and the Tourism Skills Centre offer the required training. Likewise, IDAN offers courses to keep the skills of VET professionals up to date.

In addition, Iceland has a network of Lifelong Learning (LLL) Centres that offer an alternative to formal education. This includes courses on general health-care and wellbeing, and bridges towards studying at upper-secondary and tertiary level e.g. through Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). The Lifelong Learning Centres offer career guidance both at their premises and at the workplace. With the aim to encourage people to continue learning throughout their lives in order to advance in their careers, guidance professionals visit workplaces to present the benefits of career guidance. They then offer individual appointments there or at an LLL centre. The costs are paid from the governmental Education Fund. Since the Covid-19 crisis, the LLL centres along with the sectoral and private providers have multiplied the number of available online courses they provide.

Other initiatives target specific groups such as training of people (adults and young people) with physical and/or mental disabilities or challenges, young people with difficulties entering working life, etc. The growing migrant workforce poses a new outreach challenge as few of these people have learned Icelandic to a level of competence necessary to communicate and train.

Slovakia was awarded EaSI funding in 2019 to develop a blueprint and national strategy for basic skills. Together with all the main stakeholders, the project is analysing Slovakia’s basic skills needs (who are the people to be reached) and the competence approaches used in other

EU countries. Among the outputs in production are tools for assessment of basic skills, to be administered mainly through the employment services, and training of the staff involved in basic skills development and assessment. The project will conclude in spring 2021.

People in Need is an NGO, which provides support to people in 30 countries around the world to help them get back on their feet. People in Need Slovakia is helping to support the integration of Roma communities. The integration programmes operate in five centres with extensive Roma populations. They provide a one-stop-shop approach offering holistic services ranging from pre-school clubs, tutoring and school preparation, to social, financial and employment counselling. Adult education is an integral part of the services, offering programmes that include literacy and numeracy, social skills, communication skills, digital skills, work habits and job-related skills, financial literacy, etc. Education is combined with work and includes employment counselling and preparation, an individual development plan, social and manual skill training; job search; preparation for interviews; accompanying to job interviews; post-placement support; cooperation with employers, sensitisation etc.

As public employment services are not in a position to offer such individualised services, it is important to work with NGOs and other local stakeholders. People in Need has a joint venture with the labour agency of Banska Bystrica self-governing region that combines social work and employment. To achieve this it partners with employers and institutions in the region, cooperates with social businesses and municipalities, and employees from social services in the region – further education for Roma Women, regional businesses, including agriculture cooperatives, and manufacturing companies.

Spain also presented its initiative to develop a common national framework for basic skills, which is supported by DG Reform's Technical Support Instrument. The framework will have an in-built role for guidance in the assessment and accreditation of basic skills. Spain's PIAAC results highlighted the need to act to reinforce the literacy, numeracy and digital skills of the adult population. By developing a tool to assess these skills, the project will provide the necessary resource to approach adults in order to achieve the following know-on effects:

- motivate them to participate in both formal and non-formal training programmes;
- raise awareness of their need for Lifelong Learning;
- promote participation and access to training programmes that allow the development and improvement of both basic and professional skills;
- improve employability conditions; open validation options; provide information on possible flexible training provision;
- and offer them training and employment guidance in a personalised way.

The tools and framework are being designed to reach all adults interested in knowing their level of basic skills; adults with or without basic skill levels; qualified adults who want to know their current level in basic skills; adult immigrants; vulnerable groups, e.g. women under protection, prison inmates, and people with disabilities. The guidance counsellors will be active before, during and after the assessment process. Before, to welcome and provide some initial advice and information about the process itself (interviews, chats, digital and self-assessment tools, etc.), as well as to motivate, raise awareness, give confidence to

participants. In this phase, they will build the adult's personal portfolio: CV, skills, career and educational paths. During assessment guidance counsellors will mentor, advise and support candidates and communicate with the assessment team to provide information about the candidate, making proposals to take into account in the evaluation. After the assessment, they will provide eventual job and academic guidance, customised guidance on training options, and on the labour market and its possibilities. The Ministry for Education is working with stakeholders to ensure that the resources developed encourage people to make their own decisions, and are adjusted to their needs and possibilities.

The Bulgarian Region of Burgas is located in the southeast, bordering on the Black sea and Turkey. At 20%, the level of adults with basic or lower levels of education is three points higher than the national average. In general, the adult learning sector requires attention. It is the least-developed sector in the common system of education and training, and adult participation in education and training is low. The number of people with low qualifications is almost twice that of the jobs available to them. Most of the people with a medium level of qualification do not have sufficient digital skills. Added to this are numerous obstacles including lack of employer involvement, sparse and rural population with no easy access to education, ill health and ageing, high cost and lack of time due to work obligations and inflexible working time arrangements.

In the knowledge that cooperation is a key factor for development of its adult learning sector, City Council Burgas is an active member of the National Platform "United for adult learning", coordinated by the Ministry for Education's National Lifelong Learning Coordination Group. Burgas has its own regional coordination group with representatives from relevant local stakeholders. The group ensures the implementation of National LLL Strategy at the district level; promotes adult learning policy and initiates activities at regional level; provides conditions for exchange of good practices, and supports promotion of EPAL through an ambassadors' network.

The National Programme 2020-2030 aims to improve the skills profile of the population aged 25 to 64 and to reduce the share of early school leavers. In this respect, the efforts of the regional coordination groups will focus on active dialogue and effective dissemination of good and inspiring practices. Experts have also discussed approaches to updating the analytical tools for monitoring adult learning sector in Burgas district. Plans for the future include creation of a functional "one-stop-shop" online portal for adult education, training and career guidance, development of and widening the system for career guidance for adults – skills development and career planning; promoting lifelong learning among all segments of the population as a factor for personal development, sustainable employment and social inclusion.

The case of Krakow Regional Labour Office (RLO) also illustrated the importance of regional level action in reaching out to specific groups. The core business of RLO is to act as the regional institution responsible for creating employment policy and monitoring the situation on the regional labour market, and as an intermediary institution implementing employment and training programmes for the labour market (ESF). The mission of RLO is to ensure supply of competent, qualified and employed residents in the Malopolska region. Its main services

target unemployed people, job seekers, employees and career counsellors/ advisors. As the labour market improved and employment opportunities increased, RLO was entrusted with the integration of other target groups. The Act on employment promotion and labour market institutions extends RLO's service to prisoners and people finishing therapy in psychiatric hospitals. With ESF support, RLO was given a key role in projects that target people returning from abroad, working people with the lowest qualifications, disabled people and those aged 50+.

Guidance services are a key element of the RLO services at its career information and planning centres. The three centres work with guidance counsellors at schools, career centres and public employment services, as well as experts and research teams. For the services to the specific target groups, the network is widened. Provision is dispersed through education and training providers, the Malopolska Partnership for Lifelong Learning, psychological and pedagogical counselling centres, and the Partnership for Young People. The guidance consists of career direction, vocational direction and access to a new start via a career audit or "bilan", followed by more guidance to identify gaps and access vouchers for education.

The project "**Direction Career**" aims to develop the competences of working people with low levels of qualifications and/ or the 50+ group to help them be competitive on labour market. The main obstacles to be overcome are: low motivation, wide dispersion of the target group, the scale of the project, and the low level of awareness of staff about reaching and advising this target group. Traditional promotion tools didn't work, and job/career advisors were waiting for clients to come to them but it was a waste of time. **Staff had therefore to learn new ways of communicating with and going out to meet the clients.**

Cooperation with local authorities and local leaders was a big help, as was building local relations between people who already are in projects, to convince other people from their area. The use of stories about the change such projects can bring to one's professional life was successful, but above all job advisors in local institutions had to go into companies and workplaces to get very near the workers. A number of important lessons emerged. For people with low qualifications, learning has a completely different meaning, offering standard training isn't the best way to proceed – a lot of people use the informal learning for professional development (for example YouTube). With regard to time and access, the main important issue is to plan support for workers – knowing that these people are tired!

As regards the process used, an obligatory meeting with the advisor is set up to promote the right attitude to develop and to raise awareness of job advice among working people. Access to vouchers, available online through a national register of services is considered flexible and secure. The vouchers require a contribution by the individual of between 13% and 15% depending on the audit undertaken, and can be used at all stages of the process, both sessions with an advisor and training.

Messages from the discussion

Putting services online is beneficial in reaching a large part of the population and can facilitate flexible and tailored services to the individual. However, there is that other substantial section of the population that such services exclude, most particularly, people with low digital and basic skills who cannot use digital tools, and vulnerable groups on low incomes who cannot afford the technologies required to avail of and interact with these digital services.

Talking directly with individuals and responding to their needs is good advice for counsellors and other staff.

Attention to migrants and their language barriers, in particular in countries like Iceland and Finland where the host-country language is quite difficult to learn, and the intention of the immigrants is often a short-term stay.

The Icelandic colleagues would welcome your experience and expertise in reaching out to migrants, in particular.

Reaching people through developing the system in the regions and at local level seems to be effective.

Integrated services come in many shapes and sizes, but all require partnership, such as the service to Roma people in Slovakia, broader services of lifelong learning centres in Iceland, or embedded guidance centres in the wider network of network folk high schools in Slovenia,

Many countries say that they are dependent on European Social Funds to provide targeted outreach to groups most in need.

Link to programme and all presentation on the Slovene website:

<https://epuo.acs.si/en/activities/pla-slovenia-2020/>

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