How to future-proof adult learning in cities

Adult learning systems face quite the challenge. Labour markets are rapidly changing due to demographic changes, globalisation, and the digital and green transitions. This phenomenon has only accelerated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result, workers face many new challenges as the types of jobs available change and the skills required to perform them. To ensure that workers can integrate into the changing world of work and prevent unemployment, skills and training programmes must be adapted to this new reality. Local governments are a crucial part of the puzzle: they can ensure that adult learning is tailored to local labour market needs.

To learn more about how cities better prepare their adult learning systems for the ongoing shifts, Eurocities joined forces with the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions, and Cities. In 2021, we organised a series of workshops and launched a survey among the members of our WG Employment. Cities' inputs fed into the publication of a report, "Future-proofing adult learning systems in cities: a policy manual for local governments", in January 2022, aiming to support local practitioners in designing, managing, and implementing adult learning policies.

It aims to help cities tackle the three key challenges adult learning systems face:

1) How to promote inclusion and equality through adult learning
2) How to get employers on board and meet local skills demands
3) How to create a solid local skills ecosystem

Promoting inclusion and equality through adult learning

Promoting inclusion and equality through adult learning is essential to support vulnerable groups in the labour market. These groups include migrants, youth, the elderly, the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities. They tend to be lower-skilled and have a weaker attachment to the labour market, making it even more challenging to enter the rapidly changing job market. However, despite the need, these groups also tend to be less likely to participate in skills development programmes.

To overcome these challenges, the manual recommends:

1) Targeting information and career guidance to local needs and groups, for example, provides personalised career guidance or simplifies access to support services.
2) Adapting the format, content, and eligibility criteria to local needs by using flexible forms of formal, non-formal, and informal learning and establishing programmes targeting specific at-risk groups.
3) Dedicating financing from local budgets to this particular issue. This can include investing in awareness-raising campaigns on learning opportunities and the use of financial incentives to boost participation.

4) Integrating local services and engaging social economy actors who tend to be better adapted to working with vulnerable or low-skilled groups.

One example of how to achieve this comes from Munich. It offers individual educational profiling and targeted educational programmes to refugees/migrants from the first day of arrival in the city. A vital element of the programme is the emphasis on intensive psychosocial support, which can help boost confidence and motivation. An individualised support approach allows the new arrivals to access learning programmes based on their unique needs, be it language courses, access to school learning qualifications, preparation for the labour market, etc. This significantly improves their chances of successfully entering the local labour market.

Getting employers onboard and meeting local skills demands

Getting employers on board and meeting local skills requirements is crucial when skills need to keep changing quickly. Local skills challenges and needs also do not necessarily overlap with those at the national or global level, making understanding the local context particularly crucial. On average, 40% of companies report a lack of availability of staff with the right skills. Better responding to their skills demands is a significant opportunity to boost employment and help local economies flourish.

To better understand local skills, needs and demands, cities are encouraged to:

1) Assess local skills supply and demand by investing in skills assessment and anticipation exercises. These tools can help generate information about the current and future skills needs of the labour market and the available skills supply.
2) Implement measures to match supply with demand by using skills assessment and anticipation exercises to adjust adult learning policies accordingly.
3) Actively engage employers in skills provision.

This is what Barcelona has done through its IT Academy. The Academy was set up in 2017 to maximise the potential for employment in the growing IT sector by developing professionals' digital skills in the city. It collaborates with IT companies to define training modules, provide job opportunities, and promote Barcelona's work in this sector with academic institutions.

Creating local solid skills ecosystems

A common feature of adult learning systems is their complexity and fragmentation regarding the actors involved and their different responsibilities. This may be a challenge for policymakers and practitioners at the local level who need to coordinate with various levels of government and other local stakeholders.

To overcome this, cities are encouraged to:

1) Improve coordination with higher levels of government. More significant partnerships, such as through multi-level governance boards, help national governments and even the EU better understand local needs and allows local actors to understand better and support national policies. Together with this then also helps them better address gaps.

2) Strengthen cooperation with local actors, including NGOs.
3) Develop coherent financing models at all levels of government. This can include negotiating flexible financing arrangements with regional or national governments or developing local skills financing pacts between local stakeholders like social partners, employers, and training providers.

An example of good practice in building partnerships is the Career Path Värmland programme in Karlstad. Funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), it is implemented in 11 municipalities in the region of Värmland in Sweden. The programme provides targeted career guidance combined with vocational training for groups with weak language skills. The programme is based on the fundamental principle that cross-sectoral cooperation and integrated perspectives and efforts are needed to overcome ongoing labour market challenges.

Through the programme, conditions for cross-sectoral collaboration between employers and industries with recruitment needs, the local Public Employment Offices, adult education and labour market and integration services, among others, have been developed. In addition, regional and inter-municipal collaboration is a crucial element of the project, as individual actors and municipalities often lack the resources and prerequisites to build the necessary interventions and methods on their own.

All participating cities have themselves chosen to be a part of the programme and have chosen their own focus. The Country Administration Board is primarily responsible for the project. The board coordinates the project with the participating municipalities and reports back to the ESF.

To read the full policy manual's recommendations and examples of good practices from cities across Europe, go to: https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/future-proofing-adult-learning-cities/