



AEdU HUBS

Methodological concept

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Research concept	4
Theoretical framework.....	4
Definition of AEduHUBs	8
Research methods.....	10
Literature for the Research Concept.....	12
Desk research results.....	14
Participation in adult education in rural regions	14
Adult competencies	17
Regional socio-demographic contexts	18
Regional governance structures.....	23
Demanded for adult education	28
Good practice and challenges	31
Literature for the Desk Research	33
Field research results.....	40
AEduHUBs design	40
AEduHUBs preconditions	45
Learners' perspectives on AEduHUBs	48
Roles of AEduHUBs actors.....	48
Conclusions	50
Training programme structure	52
General information.....	52
Specific information	53
Module 1: Skills identification, validation, recognition, micro-credentials	53
Module 2: Skill gaps, learning needs, adult education pathways	54
Module 3: Establishing rural adult education hubs	54
Module 4: Outreach, motivation, low-threshold entry points	55
Module 5: Designing tailored learning based on target group needs	55
Annexes	57

Tables, Figures, Annexes

Tables

Table 1. Four types of adult education/learning	4
Table 2. Four different understandings of adult education	8
Table 3. Sampling of the interviewees	12
Table 4. Overview of the demand structure and the demanded areas and topics.....	30
Table 5. Overview of the main strenghts and challenges	33
Table 6. List of services named in the interviews.....	42
Table 7. Modules, main competence areas and potential contents.....	50

Figures

Figure 1. Illustration of the multi-level coordination of the supply and demand of AE.....	6
Figure 2. Preliminary foundational model of AEduHUBs	9
Figure 3. AES formal ET in rural areas of the five partner countries.....	15
Figure 4. AES non-formal ET in rural areas of the five partner countries	15
Figure 5. AES informal learning in rural areas of the five partner countries.....	16
Figure 6. Approaches concerning the design of AEduHUBs	41
Figure 7. Options for the definition of addressees for AEduHUBs	43
Figure 8. Desirable features of an AEduHUB.....	45

Annexes

Annex 1. Word cloud concerning the definition of AEduHUBs	57
Annex 2. Clustering of the word cloud concerning the definition of AEduHUBs	57
Annex 3. Questionnaire for the desk research.....	58
Annex 4. Questionnaire for the field research	58

Introduction

Adult education (AE) is an immensely important service sector. Through continuing training and lifelong learning, adults can gain knowledge, skills and self-confidence to establish a healthy lifestyle and participate in society; to succeed in the labour market and contribute to economic productivity; to emancipate from socially imposed restrictions on their life; or simply to find joy in learning new things about the world and themselves and connect with other likeminded people. While AE is well established in urban centres and in suburban areas, in rural regions, there is a need to raise awareness for the purpose and benefits of AE and strengthen the provision of learning activities for adults of all ages. Because of this, the ERASMUS+ project by the acronym of AEduHUBs aims to support people, who are involved in AE at the regional level, in establishing *adult education hubs* (AEduHUBs) and by this, contributing to increased accessibility and inclusiveness of AE in rural regions in Europe. The partners in the project are from Graz in the region of Steiermark (Austria), Kells in region of Eastern and Midland (Ireland), Tolmezzo in the region Friuli-Venazia Giulia (Italy), Miercurea Ciuc in the region Centru (Romania) and Ormoz in the region of Vzhodna Slovenija (Slovenia).

In the project, we develop an evidence-based Methodological Concept, which serves as the basis for defining and establishing AEduHUBs; an evidence-based Training Programme for AE professionals; and the AEduHUBs-Handbook as a complement to the Training Programme. The Methodological Concept presented in this report builds on research, which was conducted by all five partners to gain insights into what is needed to establishment regional AEduHUBs. We start with an overview of the Research Concept. Then, we present results from the Kick Off Meeting, from the Desk Research and the Field Research. The report ends with an outline of the Training Programme.

Research concept

The Research Concept includes theoretical and methodological considerations. These considerations served a threefold purpose: first, they were employed in formulating questions for the Desk Research and the Field Research; second, they were applied in interpreting and comparing the results from the Desk Research and the Field Research; and third, they were integrated in the outline of the Training Programme to strengthen the participants ability to use abstract concepts to better understand and contextualise one's own practice.

Theoretical framework

When we talk about *adult education* (AE), we use this term synonymously with *adult learning* (AL). The two terms refer to all education and learning adults undertake across the life course. When we talk about learning, we focus more on what the individual does to acquire knowledge, skills or competences; when we talk about education, we focus more on what teachers, mentors, tutors, counsellors, programme planners, providers or decision makers do to facilitate learning. We define four types of learning and education: formal education/learning, non-formal education/learning, informal learning and incidental learning. Table 1 compares the four types of education/learning by using the most important criteria of learner activity, learner intention, external structure and state certificate.

Table 1. Four types of adult education/learning

Education/ Learning	Learner activity (e.g. reading, discussing, designing)	Learner intention (e.g. participation, assignments, reflection)	External structure (e.g. curriculum, course structure, teaching)	State certificate (e.g. school, apprenticeship, university)
Formal	X	X	X	X
Non-formal	X	X	X	
Informal	X	X		
Incidental	X			

Source: Adapted from Kraus, 2014, p. 221

We assume that AEduHUBs are embedded within an *adult learning system* (ALS). Because of this, we connect two perspectives for the theoretical framework to make comprehensible what AEduHUBs are and what is needed to establish an AEduHUB. The first perspective looks at the characteristics ALS and at AEduHUBs as a specific means for coordinating the demand and supply of AE. The second perspective looks at four different understandings of AE. These understandings can give orientation in developing and establishing AEduHUBs.

Adult learning systems, coordination and education hubs

The term ALS refers to the “configuration of institutions, policies, financing mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, and actors that, within a given national context, shape who learns what, when, where, and how across the adult life course.” (Desjardins & Kalenda, 2026a, p. 6). An ALS is characterized by three aspects: boundaries, interdependencies and emergent properties (ibid.).

Boundaries define what is included in an ALS and what is excluded. Boundaries can be defined with a *geographical scope* in mind and focussed on the national, regional or local level. Boundaries can also be defined with an *lifelong age scope* in mind. Then, they can focus on people from a predefined age onwards

(e.g. 15 years and older or 25 years and older), or address people within one or more specific age group(s) (e.g. young adults, working-age adults, or older adults.) A third way to define boundaries is with a *lifewide scope of learning activities* in mind. Then, it could include formal education/learning, non-formal education/learning and/or informal learning. With a *lifewide scope of learning activities* in mind, an ALS could also focus on four areas of formal education/learning and non-formal education/learning (Desjardins, 2017, pp. 19–20):

- *Adult basic education* (ABE), e.g. literacy courses, general schooling or second chance education. The intention is to facilitate the acquisition of basic competences (e.g. reading, writing, or mathematics) or facilitate the acquisition of primary or secondary level certificates.
- *Adult vocational education* (AVE), e.g. industrial training, labour market oriented up-/reskilling, or workplace learning. The intention is to facilitate the acquisition of basic and advanced competences needed on the labour market or facilitate the acquisition of certificates or other confirmations needed to enter or continue in the labour market.
- *Adult higher education* (AHE), e.g. post-secondary programmes, university preparation courses, university continuing education. The intention is to facilitate the acquisition of academic or advanced professional competences (e.g. academic writing, scientific research, project management) and the acquisition of post-secondary certificates (e.g. college diploma, bachelor's or master's degree).
- *Adult popular education* (APE), e.g. language courses, liberal arts courses, or community education. The intention is to facilitate the acquisition of competences in whatever topic they are interested in or in whatever topic they consider to be useful for their private or professional life. This might include also topics such as gardening, cooking, crafts or singing.

Interdependencies means that changes in one area or outside an ALS affect (other) areas of an ALS. An example: When immigration policy reform reduces the influx of migrants, they might change the language requirements, which directly affects AE programmes for migrants and might indirectly affect all ABE programmes simply because they often address migrants. Or: When *active labour market policy* (ALMP) reform focusses on efficient public spending and demands a quality management certificate from providers of AVE programmes, this might directly affect all AE providers who must compete for public money and might indirectly affect small AE providers who can not easily afford to pay for a quality management certificate.

Emergent properties are outcomes or an added value, which result from the existence of specific patterns of the ALS. They cannot be directly connected to the services or performance of one AE programme, one AE provider or one policy measure. Single measure can facilitate individual outcomes (e.g. knowledge and skills, or transition to a new workplace), but no single measure alone can achieve collective outcomes, such as social cohesion, social justice or regional development. These outcomes depend on components of the ALS, for instance, a corporatist or participatory governance, targeted financing schemes, or an interconnection of social and educational policy at the national level.

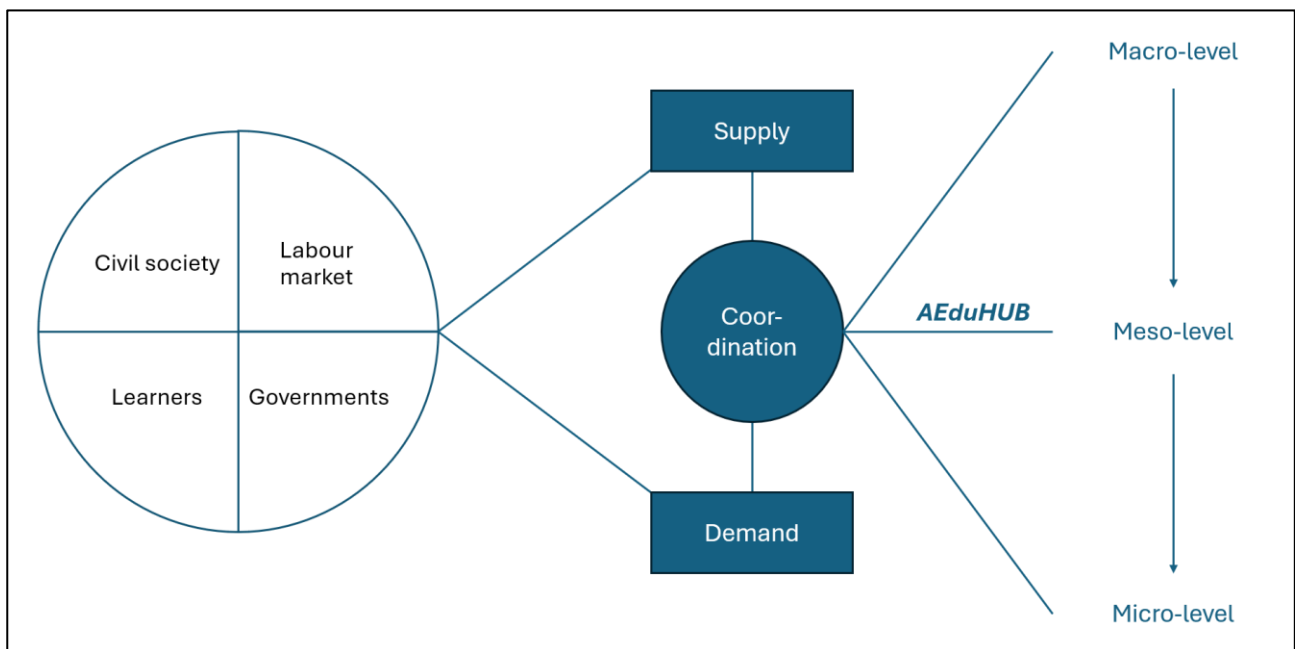
To understand the functioning and development of an ALS, we must consider five components: demand, supply, coordination, learning, and outcomes (Desjardins & Kalenda, 2026a, p. 7):

- **Demand** concerns the learning needs of learners, the labour market, of governments, and the civil society as well as the individual, social and institutional barriers learners' encounter.

- **Supply** concerns the quantity, diversity and quality of education and learning possibilities, which are offered by providers.
- **Coordination** concerns the principles, mechanisms, instruments and arrangements, which serve to align demand and supply of AE.
- **Learning** concerns individual learning, which is facilitated through structured provision (e.g. courses, seminars, lectures etc.). This provision results from the coordination of demand and supply.
- **Outcomes** are the immediate results of learning (e.g. acquisition of knowledge or skills) and the more distant individual and societal results (e.g. employability, emancipation, social cohesion).

Coordination is the key component. It can occur at the macro-level, where it is related to the actions of nationals or regional governments, interest groups or markets. It can occur at the meso-level, where it is related to actors, such as educational institutions, training organisations, municipalities, companies or social service providers. Coordination can also occur at the micro-level, where it is related to programme planning, counselling and guidance (Desjardins & Kalenda, 2026a, p. 9). We suggest that AEduHUBs are one way to coordinate the demand and supply of AE on a meso-level (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Illustration of the multi-level coordination of the supply and demand of AE



Source: Adopted and slightly changed from Desjardins & Kalenda, 2026b, p. 15

There are four types of coordination at the level of the nation state related to the political principle that guides the coordination and affect what is possible at all other levels (Desjardins, 2017, pp. 25–31):

- **Market-led coordination** means that supply and demand are coordinated by mechanisms of the free-market. This political principle is fundamental in Anglo-American countries but becomes increasingly prominent in all countries.

- **State-led coordination** means that supply and demand are coordinated by national governments based on laws, regulations, financing schemes or curricula. This political principle is widespread in Romance or in Eastern-European countries.
- **Stakeholder-led coordination** means supply and demand of AE are coordinated through interest groups, such as chambers of commerce, chambers of industry and chambers of labour. This political principle is historically rooted in German speaking countries.
- **State-led coordination with a strong stakeholder involvement** means that governments cooperate intensively with interest groups in coordinating demand and supply. This political principle is distinctive of Nordic countries.

At the meso-level, we suggest that AEduHUBs are arrangements through which the demand and supply of AE is coordinated. The term ‘hub’ is used in many different contexts, such as industry, banking, technology or education. According to Knight (2011, 2024), the term ‘hub’ usually refers to a diverse group of people or organisations that come together and form a central point for activities. She defines an education hub as “a planned effort to build a critical mass of local and international actors strategically engaged in education, training, knowledge production, and innovation initiatives” (Knight, 2011, p. 233). This definition consists of three core ideas, which are equally applicable to regional AEduHUBs:

- A hub is the results of a **planned effort**, means that it is more than the coincidental co-location of different people or organisations in one geographical area and more than an occasional cooperation between these people or organisations. Rather, a hub “involves a strategy, policy framework, and public/private investment plan” (Knight, 2024, p. 2).
- A hub involves a **critical mass of different actors**, means that more than one actor is involved in the hub. A campus or a program, which is created by only one actor is not a hub. “The term actors is used in an inclusive manner so as to cover providers, producers and users of the education, training, knowledge services” (Knight, 2024, p. 2). These actors can be co-located in one geographical area or in different geographical areas, such as different regions or different municipalities.
- The actors **engage strategically** in accordance with a shared understanding of AE, a shared intention, purpose or goal. Fundamental to this strategic engagement is the creation of outcomes or an added value that emerges from the interactions, collaboration, services or shared facilities and resources.

Understandings of adult education

The strategical engagement of actors in an AEduHUB demands a shared understanding of AE. We use the work of Bagnall and Hodge (2022, p. 81) to present four different understandings: the disciplinary, the developmental, the emancipatory, and the design understanding. Table 2 compares these four understandings.

- **The disciplinary understanding** corresponds with positivism and assumes that academic, vocational or professional disciplines provide good reasons for provision of AE services, as they allow the promotion of individual well-being based on learning that supports rational action.
- **The developmental understanding** is congruent with constructionism. Communities of practice in a village, group of likeminded adults, or in the workplace, are considered the place where dialogue occurs. Humanism emphasises that self-determination is the key to individual development and social progress.

- **The emancipatory understanding** resonates with the post-structuralism because it locates learning and education within communication networks where knowledge and experiences are shared among various participants in the attempt to transform the given in society to achieve a better world for all.
- **The design understanding** is eclectic. It adopts a constructionist epistemology with a focus on problem solving but locates the problems primarily in the labour market. It is positivist because it assumes that the labour market is an objective reality and that through observation of labour market demands, it is possible to deduce rules to be followed, so that AE leads to productive engagement and adults, who can accommodate societal transformation.

Table 2. Four different understandings of adult education

	<i>Design</i>	<i>Disciplinary</i>	<i>Developmental</i>	<i>Emancipatory</i>
Focus in AE	Accommodation	Rational action	Humanism	Transformation
Goal in AE	Productive engagement	Individual well-being	Self-determination	A better world
Basis for AE	Following rules	Good reasons	Dialogue	Shared knowledge and experience
AE contexts	Labour market	Disciplines	Communities of practice	Communication networks

Source: Authors' own creation based on Bagnall & Hodge, 2022

Definition of AEduHUBs

At the Kick Off Meeting, we collect what project partners associate with the notion of *adult education hubs* (AEduHUBs). The results were integrated and illustrated in a first step in a word cloud (Annex 1), and in a second step, clustered and categorised (Annex 2). What emerged from is a preliminary foundational model of AEduHUBs with four dimensions: a definitional dimension, a normative dimension, a strategic dimension, and an outcome dimension (Figure 2).

Definitory dimension of AEduHUBs: What is an AEduHUB?

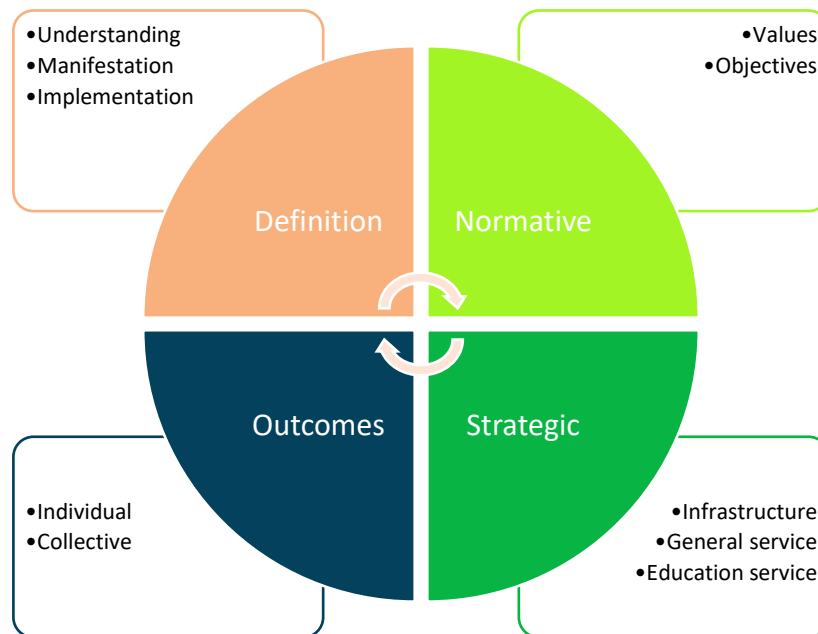
An AEduHUB is a combined physical and digital structure that serves as a social focal point within a network. It connects diverse communities, as well as collective and individual actors who have an interest in AE and the capacity to promote the functioning of AEduHUBs as well as the development of concrete AE provision. An AEduHUB can take a stable form, such as a community centre, a centre for social interaction and the sharing of common interests, or a physical and/or digital space for the exchange of information, experiences, or ideas relating to educational pathways and learning opportunities. Specifically, an AEduHUB is a centre where various adult education services are coordinated and offered. As such, an AEduHUB resembles the idea of a one-stop shop. Most importantly, an AEduHUB requires someone, who is responsible and accountable for the functioning of the hub, its provision and services.

Normative dimension of AEduHUBs: What is the purpose of an AEduHUB?

An AEduHUB is founded on openness and welcomes diversity among those who approach, frequent, or participate in its activities. Accordingly, an AEduHUB adopts an intergenerational understanding of AE, addressing young adults transitioning into adult life, adults establishing a family or pursuing a career, older adults gradually moving into the post-employment phase, and adults retired from working life, all on equal

terms. An AEduHUB ensures inclusiveness by making certain that all people in a region can access services that are sensitive to their needs and ideally tailored to meet their individual demands — whether physical, psychological, or related to their desired educational opportunities or pathways. Inclusivity means that everyone can access the AEduHUB and its services, and if none of the services suit the needs of a client, no one leaves the hub without being given advice on where to find more appropriate services. This reflects a broad understanding of AE, ranging from ABE, AVE, AHE, and APE to lifelong guidance, and a holistic approach to the services provided.

Figure 2. Preliminary foundational model of AEduHUBs



Source: Authors' own creation

Strategic dimension of AEduHUBs: What characterises the services of an AEduHUB?

An AEduHUB is built on a blended approach, combining digital services with those provided on-site. Ideally, these complement each other to establish a broadly accessible and inclusive service structure relevant to all people in a region, municipality, or community. The blended approach focuses not only on the provision of information but also on the creation of interactive spaces, ensuring that digital services are likewise based on communication, dialogue, and human support. All interaction and communication should be informal and aim to create an atmosphere in which all clients and participants feel relaxed and can use the services without fear of inadequacy or failure.

Regardless of the communication channel (e.g. websites, social media, flyers, posters), all communication should provide reliable information and ensure that services are communicated transparently. An open-door policy should be adopted to lower the threshold for people unfamiliar with AE. The opening hours of the physical premises should consider the time available to clients and participants, and this should also be ensured through flexible timetables. In addition, childcare facilities, as well as affordable food and spaces where people can have a snack should be provided.

Educational services should be diverse and offer various guidance services, where adults can learn about their competences, understand their interests and opportunities for future learning and professional development, and access concrete learning formats such as lectures, workshops, seminars, or courses. These formats should cover a broad range of content, have practical value for learners, and be adaptable to the needs and requests of learners and their communities. Professionals (e.g. counsellors, lecturers, trainers, or tutors) should have comprehensive expertise regarding the content of their services, as well as competencies to provide pedagogical support and to encourage and enable peer support among participants.

Outcome dimension of AEduHUBs: What are the benefits of an AEduHUB?

On the individual level, AEduHUBs should facilitate lifelong learning. This outcome should be achieved by referring clients to other AE providers within and outside the hub structure (guidance), as well as by providing various learning formats directly. Lifelong learning is expected to increase personal well-being (e.g. self-efficacy, self-confidence, health), strengthen the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and thus contribute to personal development. After all, lifelong guidance and lifelong learning provision aim to increase the range of possibilities and opportunities available to individuals to achieve a better life. On a collective level, AEduHUBs should promote the progress of AE by connecting existing provision, various organisations, and learners. Furthermore, they should have an impact in the region, municipalities, or community by contributing to lifelong learning and, indirectly, to regional, municipal, or community development.

Research methods

The research was designed with the principle of triangulation in mind (Flick, 2018). Triangulation refers to research that combines two or more research perspectives (e.g. researchers, theories, methods or data) to draw a comprehensive picture of the research subject (Figure 2). The intention is to strengthen the body of knowledge about the subject and increase the validity of the insights. Our research subject were conditions for establishing an AEduHUB, and we wanted to draw implications concerning the design of the Training Programme. Given that all project partners contributed to the research, we made use of the researcher triangulation. Furthermore, we employed two methodological approaches, that of desk research and that of field research. With desk research, we used existing sources to produce textual and numeric secondary and tertiary data and with field research, we used semi-structured interviews to generate textual primary data. This combination allowed us to have a triangulation of methods and a triangulation of data.

Desk research

Desk research makes use of already existing information and knowledge from various sources. We employed this method to gain an understanding of the socio-demographic situation, the governance structure and the AE demands in the five regions. Desk research concentrates on the collection, consolidation and analysis of secondary data and tertiary data. Secondary data is quantitative or qualitative data that has already been processed and disseminated in numeric (e.g. raw datasets, statistics), oral (e.g. a video of a discussion), visual (e.g. a map of a region) or textual (e.g. laws, strategies, reports, leaflets) form. Tertiary data refers to texts, such as websites, articles or books, in which primary or secondary data have been processed, consolidated and/or interpreted (Bassot, 2022).

All project partners were asked to start with a focussed search within physical or digital libraries or databases (e.g. EUROSTAT, national statistical platforms), publication media (e.g. journals, websites, video-platforms) or other places (e.g. archives or information desks of AE providers, regional or municipal offices). All sources and documents found were collected for a transparent use of references. Focussed search meant that the project partners were provided with concrete questions (Annex 4). These questions had to be answered in a textual manner at a length of minimum 500 and maximum 800 words and integrated into a regional report. The primary method we suggested was based on a simple document analysis and was partly semantic (i.e. literal summary) and partly thematic (i.e. interpreted summary) (Bowen, 2009). For the presentation of the desk research results in this report, the regional reports were summarized, complemented with results from the *Adult Education Survey* (AES) and the *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC) and finally re-structured by comparison.

Field research

Field research aims to generate primary data through direct interaction with people from the field (e.g. surveys or interviews). For us, this meant interactions with people in regions, municipalities, communities, and people from AE providers. For our field research, we conducted interviews with a semi-structured questionnaire. The setting could be a synchronous face-to-face setting, either in person or online. Alternatively, it could be an asynchronous setting, where the questionnaire was sent out, answered in written form and returned to the project partners.

The goal of the field research was to gather perspectives and experiences of various actors to better understand the local conditions for establishing AEduHUBs. To generate information rich and appropriate data, it was aimed for a homogeneous sample based on criterion sampling (Samuel & Merkebu, 2026). We defined four groups of actors: decision makers, AE providers, AE professionals, and adult learners. At least one person from each of the four groups was to be interviewed (Table 2). The groups were defined as follows:

- **Decision makers** are individuals or groups who make decisions about policies, strategies, or budgets relevant for AE. They are outside an organisation that provides AE and can operate at local, regional or national levels.
- **Providers** are public and private organisations that offer AE possibilities. Providers are responsible for developing, organising, and implementing AE possibilities. They are represented by someone with a management function (e.g. director of an adult education centre).
- **Professionals** are specialists who work in AE. This includes, for example, teachers, trainers, tutors, or counsellors who directly interact with learners or design AE possibilities.
- **Learners** are the participants in educational offerings and programmes. They can come from different age groups and professional backgrounds, and they pursue various learning goals.

To generate answers in synchronous and asynchronous settings, we used a semi-structured questionnaire. Our questionnaire combined closed and open-ended questions, accompanied by contextualising introductory questions and specifying follow-up questions (what, why, and how). A semi-structured questionnaire has the advantage that it blends well with other data generation methods (e.g. analysis of quantitative secondary data, analysis of documents, interactive workshop methods), as it serves the purpose of gaining in-depth knowledge about the topics of interest (Adams, 2015).

Table 3. Sampling of the interviewees

	AUT	ITA	IRL	SLO	RUM	Total
Decision makers	2	1	1	1	1	6
AE providers	2	1	1	1	1	6
AE professionals	1	1	1	1	1	5
Adult learners	2	2	1	1	1	7
Total	7	5	4	4	4	24

The questionnaire was developed using the CESS method (i.e. collect, evaluate, sort, subsume) (Helfferich, 2022). In the first step, a collection of potential questions for each group of interviewees (decision makers, providers, professionals, learners) was compiled. Once a comprehensive overview of the questions had been obtained, the questions were systematically organised and categorised. Individual interview guidelines were then created for each group of interviewees. The next step was a detailed analysis and comparison of the interview questions for each group of interviewees. Based on this, the guidelines were adapted and finalised (Annex 4). Moreover, we formulated an information document for informed consent and data protection that was sent-out or handed-out to all interviewees and signed by them upon their consent.

The interviews were conducted and the questionnaires were filled in, respectively, in the standard language of each region. Audio recording exists were transcribed using the *aTrain* transcription software developed by the University of Graz (Haberl et al., 2024) and translated by the project partners into English. The final transcripts were transferred to the MAXQDA data analysis software, where they were analysed in accordance with the qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2024). For the qualitative content analysis, we combined deductive and inductive coding. The main topics of the questionnaire were used as for deductive coding, which was carried out in a first round of transcript reading. For the second round of transcript reading, we divided the basic categories among ourselves so that each person had a certain number of categories to apply inductive coding and write code summaries.

The method of focused summarising was used to create inductive codes (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2024) and theoretical points of reference from the theoretical framework were used for inductive coding. As the main theoretical points of reference, we used the four understandings by Bagnall and Hodge (2022). This typology allowed us to reconstruct and cluster answers from the interviews so that we could describe them in a more coherent fashion. Finally, the categories were regrouped to produce main categories and subcategories, and summaries were written for each category. These summaries were transferred to this report and are presented in a reviewed version.

Literature for the Research Concept

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Desk research results

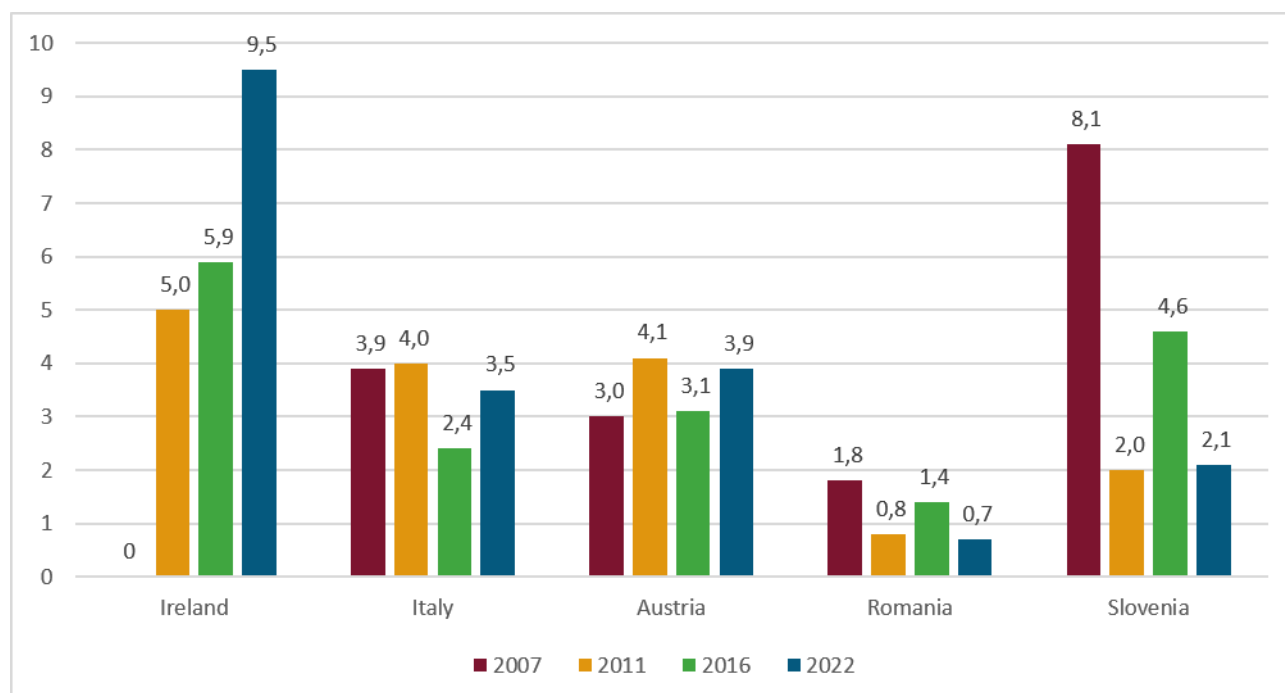
Through Desk Research, we aimed for a better understanding of the conditions for establishing an *adult education hub* (AEduHUB). To this end, we addressed four questions: What does the socio-demographic context in the five regions look like? What does the governance structure of the *adult learning system* (ALS) look like? What AE is demanded in the region? What works well and what are the greatest challenges in addressing these demands? We complement answers to these questions with statistics concerning the participation in AE and with regard to adult competencies.

Participation in adult education in rural regions

Figure 3 below provides information from the *Adult Education Survey* (AES) on the development of the participation rate in formal education in rural areas. Looking at the results for 2007, a particularly high percentage of 8.1 percent in rural areas of Slovenia is striking. Romania, on the other hand, recorded only 1.8 percent participation in formal education in the same year. Four years later, however, there was a substantial decline of 6.1 percentage points in formal education in rural areas of Slovenia. Italy and Austria had almost identical percentages for 2011, at 4.0 and 4.1 percent respectively, and saw an increase of 0.1 and 1.1 percentage points respectively in formal education compared to 2007. Ireland was excluded from the 2007 survey, but has the highest AES formal education participation in rural areas in both 2016 (5.9 percent) and 2022 (9.5 percent). Rural regions in Italy, on the other hand, lost 1.6 percentage points, but participation in formal education increased again in 2022 (3.5 percent). In Romania's rural regions, there was initially an increase in the participation rate (up 1.4 percentage points), but in 2022, the lowest value of formal education in rural areas was reached at 0.7 percent. In summary, it is notable that, over the years, there has generally been a comparatively low percentage of participation in formal education in Romania's rural regions. Finally, the 6 percentage point drop in Slovenia's rural regions between 2007 and 2022 is also striking. Overall, the analysis shows that formal education accounts for only a small proportion of AE in the five selected European regions.

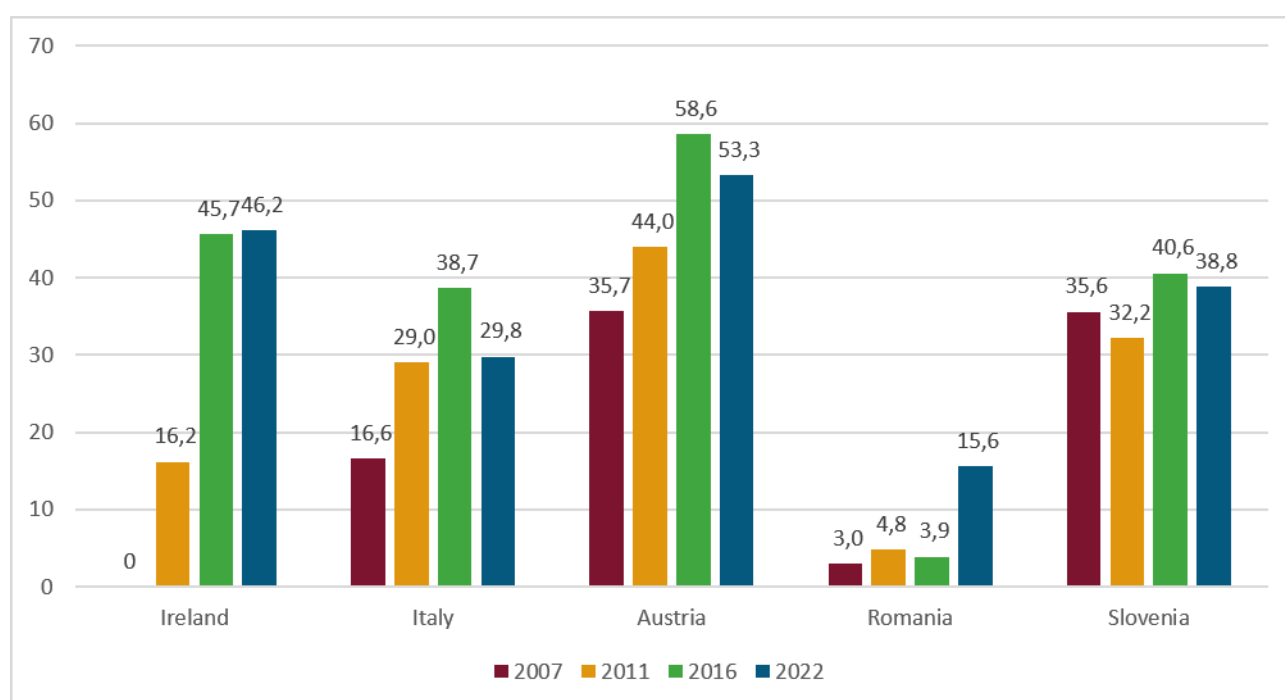
Figure 4 on the next page shows the development of participation rates in non-formal education. In general, a positive trend in participation in non-formal education can be seen over the period, although the extent of this varies from country to country. Austria and Ireland are particularly notable, with the highest proportion of people participating in non-formal education by 2022. The participation rate in Austria was 35.7 percent in 2007 and rose to 58.6 percent by 2016, before falling slightly to 53.3 percent in 2022. Between 2011 and 2016, participation in Ireland rose sharply from 16.2 percent to 45.7 percent and remained at a high level until 2022. The results in Italy and Slovenia fluctuated more or less throughout the entire period. From 2007 to 2016, Italy saw a significant increase in participation rates from 16.6 percent to 38.7 percent. However, according to data from 2022, this was followed by a decline of 8.9 percentage points. The proportion of people participating in non-formal education in Slovenia remained relatively constant over the period in question, ranging between 32.2 percent (2007) and 40.6 percent (2016). The lowest percentage (3.0 percent) is found in rural areas of Romania. Until 2016, the participation rate remained at a very low level, before reaching 15.6 percent in 2022. Despite this significant increase, Romania is still well below the EU average. In summary, there has been an increase in non-formal learning participation, albeit to varying degrees.

Figure 3. AES formal ET in rural areas of the five partner countries



Source: Authors' own creation based on <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/database>

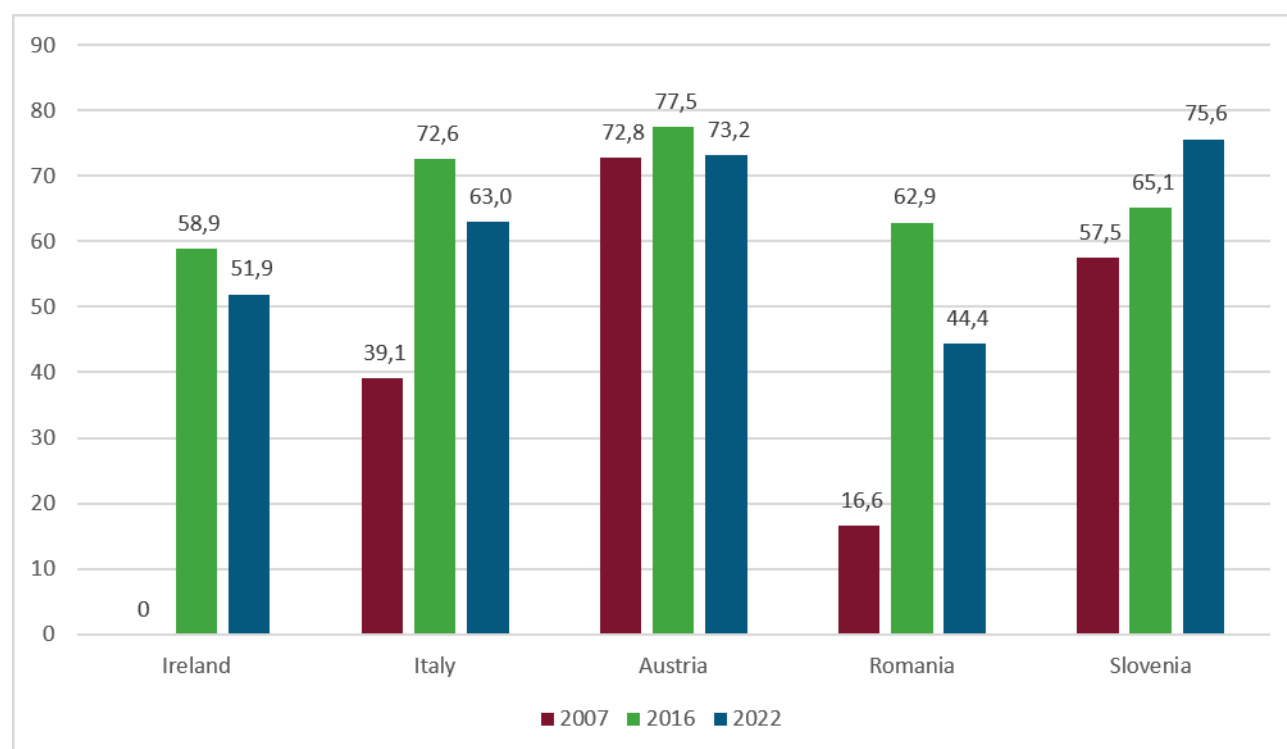
Figure 4. AES non-formal ET in rural areas of the five partner countries



Source: Authors' own creation based on <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/database>

Finally, Figure 5 provides an overview of participation in informal learning in rural areas of Ireland, Italy, Austria, Romania, and Slovenia. It is striking that the percentages are generally much higher than in the AES surveys on formal and non-formal education in rural regions. Austria is particularly notable, where the proportion of people participating in informal learning remains consistently high (77.8 percent in 2007, 77.5 percent in 2016, 73.2 percent in 2022). Above-average percentages can also be observed in rural areas of Italy (39.1 percent in 2007, 72.6 percent in 2016, 63.0 percent in 2022) and Slovenia (57.5 percent in 2007, 65.1 percent in 2016, 75.6 percent in 2022). This again points to a strong learning culture that goes beyond formal education. The proportion of informal learning is also at a relatively high level in Ireland, falling only between 2016 (58.9 percent) and 2022 (51.9 percent). However, the development in rural areas of Romania is particularly striking, where participation in informal learning rose from 16.6 percent in 2007 to 62.9 percent in 2016. This was followed by a decline, but only to 44.4 percent in 2022. In summary, the results show that informal learning is the most widespread form of learning in rural areas in the five countries. The high participation rate clearly shows that learning is increasingly taking place outside formal education and are therefore a central element of lifelong learning. This makes it all the more important to regard informal learning as an equal part of the educational landscape and to implement educational policy measures to promote them.

Figure 5. AES informal learning in rural areas of the five partner countries



Source: Authors' own creation based on <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/database>

Adult competencies

Austria shows mixed results in *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC) and can be classified in the upper-middle performance range. Austria's literacy score, at 254 points, is below the OECD average, while both numeracy skills (267 points) and adaptive problem-solving (253 points) slightly exceed the OECD average. Comparing the two PIAAC survey cycles shows a decline in literacy in Austria by around twelve points. Austria thus follows an international trend, as in most participating countries, literacy either decreased or remained unchanged (ibid., pp. 8, 22, 24–26, 32). The results of the 2022/23 PIAAC survey also show that in Austria, there is a connection between adults' basic skills and their employment situation, educational level, and social participation. On average, employed people have higher competence scores than unemployed people (Statistik Austria, 2025, pp. 21, 51). Furthermore, the employment rate of adults with low literacy is 60 percent, thus, below the OECD average of 64 percent, highlighting the importance of basic skills for the labour market. Additionally, the results show that better basic skills among Austrian adults are associated with better health, higher social trust, and more frequent volunteer engagement (ibid., pp. 9, 10, 57).

Ireland, with a literacy score of 263 points, surpasses both Austria and the OECD average, while its results in numeracy (260 points) and adaptive problem-solving (249 points) are below the OECD average. The comparatively high level of literacy is a particular strength of Irish adults. Overall, Ireland is also positioned in the upper performance range internationally (ibid., pp. 24–26). In all three areas of competence, Italy scores below the OECD average. In literacy, Italy achieves a score of 245 points, while in numeracy it scores 244 points. In adaptive problem-solving, the score for Italian adults is lower at 231 points. Overall, the results show that Italy lags behind Austria and Ireland in all three areas of competence. The gap is particularly pronounced in adaptive problem-solving, while the differences in literacy and numeracy are somewhat smaller (ibid.).

Since Slovenia was only covered in the first PIAAC survey round (2013–2016), no further data from the survey have been available since then, and Romania has not participated in any PIAAC survey in recent years. For this reason, additional OECD studies are used to examine and analyse comparable indicators of adult education and skills development in these two countries.

For Slovenia, the 'Education and Training Monitor 2025' is used as a source, which contains information on adult participation in continuing education and basic digital skills. According to the report, the participation of Slovenian adults in educational activities between 2016 and 2022 fell from 40.3 percent to 26.5 percent, with participation measured within the last twelve months. More recent data from 2024 show that 23.1 percent of Slovenian adults participated in continuing education within the last four weeks. It is important to note that the results are not directly comparable due to the shorter observation period. Nevertheless, the current data, given the shorter observation period, can be seen as an indication of at least a positive development in continuing education participation in Slovenia, even though the value is below the EU average of 39.5 percent. Digital basic skills are also considered a challenge, as in 2024 only 46.7 percent of the Slovenian population aged 16 to 74 had at least basic digital skills. Slovenia is also below the EU average of 56 percent in this area (European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2025, p. 16).

As mentioned above, Romania has not participated in the OECD PIAAC study, so there are no comparable competence scores for adults' basic skills. However, the OECD study 'Education and Skills in Romania' (2025) points to challenges in adult skills development. In particular, deficits in basic digital skills and low participation in continuing education are evident (OECD, 2025, pp. 209–213). In 2023, just over 28 percent of Romania's population aged 16 to 74 had basic digital skills. Compared to other EU member states, this is the lowest share (ibid., p. 212). The participation of Romanian adults in formal and non-formal education and training has increased in recent years, but remains low in the European comparison. In 2022, 26 percent of people aged 25 to 64 participated in education and training activities, up from just 7 percent in 2016. Despite this positive development, Romania remains below the average of many EU countries and well below the EU target for 2030 of 60 percent (ibid., p. 209).

Regional socio-demographic contexts

The region of Styria in Austria

Styria is one of the nine federal states of Austria and is divided into four sub-regions (Styrian Central Area, Upper Styria, Eastern Styria, and South-Western Styria) (Amt der Steiermärkischen Landesregierung (A17 Landes- und Regionalentwicklung), 2025, p. 6). According to statistical data, Styria has an ageing population structure. The proportion of people aged 65 and older is 20.7 percent, which is higher than that of the 0- to 19-year-olds (18 percent). Nationwide in Austria, however, there is an almost balanced ratio between these age groups (19.3 percent and 19.2 percent, respectively). The average age in Styria is 44.3 years, with women (45.6 years) being older on average than men (42.9 years). Projections indicate a further increase in the proportion of people over 65, meaning that demographic aspects will continue to gain importance (Land Steiermark, 2025, n. p.).

The target group for AE in Styria, as in many parts of Europe, is characterised by heterogeneity and is divided based on various social and educational policy priorities. Nevertheless, certain relevant target groups can be identified through current strategy and funding measures. For example, the Austrian Lifelong Learning Strategy (LLL:2020) states that educational opportunities should be accessible and barrier-free for all groups of people. Particular emphasis is placed on reaching those who have so far participated only minimally in continuing education measures. This target group primarily includes adults with limited educational backgrounds (Gruber & Lenz, 2023, p. 82; Amt der Steiermärkischen Landesregierung (A6 Fachabteilung Gesellschaft), 2023, n. p.). One reason for specifically supporting this target group is that AE not only promotes personal and professional development, but also has an impact on social and political participation (Land Steiermark, 2026, n. p.). This is also clearly demonstrated by the Adult Education Initiative (Initiative Erwachsenenbildung), which was launched in 2012 as a joint initiative of the federal government and the provinces and is now known as Level Up – Adult Education (Level Up – Erwachsenenbildung). The initiative focuses on individuals without a compulsory school diploma and offers them the opportunity to obtain educational qualifications as well as to acquire essential basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics (Paar, 2024, n. p.). Furthermore, the older population is becoming an increasingly important target group in adult education. As mentioned earlier, life expectancy in Austria is rising, and the post-employment phase of life now spans a longer period. Consequently, older individuals are offered opportunities to actively shape this stage of life, and lifelong learning has a central role in this context. Educational and learning opportunities

in later life can significantly contribute to maintaining and even improving quality of life and promoting social participation (Müller, 2018, pp. 4–5).

The region of Eastern and Midland in Ireland

As of April 2025, the population of Ireland is estimated at 5.46 million (CSO). Among adults aged 25–64, approximately 458,000 engaged in formal and/or non-formal learning in the four weeks prior to the SOLAS study conducted in April 2025, reflecting a lifelong learning (LLL) participation rate of 16 percent (SOLAS). According to the Central Statistics Office’s Adult Education Survey 2022, 52 percent of Irish adults aged 25–69 reported participating in lifelong learning during that year.

County Meath recorded a population of 220,826 in the 2022 Census, representing a 13 percent growth since 2016 (CSO). Although no publicly available data provides the exact number of Meath residents participating in adult education, census results show that 62,600 people in the county (around 45 percent of those aged 15 and over) held a third-level qualification in 2022 (CSO). Additionally, the Louth and Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB) reports that at least 20,000 Meath residents are beneficiaries of Further Education and Training (FET). However, participation in FET does not include broader lifelong learning activities such as community workshops, Men’s Sheds, or hobby-based courses, suggesting that overall engagement is significantly higher.

As of March 2025, Ireland’s unemployment rate stood at 4.0 percent, representing 114,800 people (CSO). Gender differences in unemployment remain minimal, with men and women showing similar rates in Q1 2025. However, unskilled workers recorded the highest unemployment rate at 16 percent (CSO). Those whose highest level of education was primary school (or no formal education) experienced the highest unemployment rate across educational groups at 22 percent. This underscores the need for strengthened educational and training supports in rural and marginalised areas, particularly for individuals with low levels of formal educational attainment.

The region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in Italy

Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG) is located in the far north-east of Italy, in a geographical position of particular strategic and cultural importance. The region represents a meeting point between the Mediterranean area, Central Europe, and Eastern Europe, historically established as a border and trading territory. FVG borders Austria to the north, Slovenia to the east, the Veneto region to the west, and the Adriatic Sea to the south. From the point of view of public administration, FVG is an autonomous region. This autonomy is linked both to its geographical position and to the historical presence of linguistic and cultural minorities. This gives the region more power in areas such as land-use planning, local development, and education.

The natural balance of the FVG region is negative. The number of deaths has been higher than the number of births and could only partially be balanced by incoming migration (INPS 2024, p. 8). Overall, the demographic trend shows significant changes in the distribution of the population by age. The population aged 0–14 represents only a small fraction of the total population, while the elderly population is growing rapidly. This leads to a series of economic and social challenges and the difficulty of sustaining a declining workforce. At the same time, the working-age population from the age of 18 onwards represents 61.6 percent of the total population of the region; therefore, AE in the FVG region would have a substantial target group.

In light of demography, AE has a strategic role. Investing in AE is essential to maintaining economic competitiveness and social cohesion. Since the majority of the population is of working age, AE provides updating and retraining of professional skills, promotes employability, adaptation to changes in the labour market, and active participation in social and economic life. In this regard, AE an essential lever for the sustainable development of the region.

The FVG region has seen an increase in employment among the 15–64 age group, which rose by 7,000, from 501,000 to 508,000. This increase has helped to reduce the gender gap: the male employment rate stands at 74.4 percent, while the female rate is 64.6 percent. However, despite this improvement, unemployment has risen by 9.8 percent overall. The phenomenon is particularly marked among men, with a male unemployment rate of 12.8 percent, compared to 6.9 percent for women (Corriere dell'Economia, 2026, n. p.). In line with these figures, positive employment data is also recorded, highlighting that rates for FVG are above the national average in terms of employment, unemployment containment, and the labour market inclusion of young adults (INPS 2024, p. 8).

IRES Friuli Venezia Giulia indicates an income distribution characterised by marked socio-demographic inequalities. The average total income stands at €24,568 but shows significant differences by gender and age: women declare average incomes that are more than a third lower than that of men (€19,324 compared to €29,586). Also, women are underrepresented in the higher income brackets, where they account for only 26 percent of taxpayers earning over €40,000. From a demographic point of view, the highest income levels are concentrated in the middle of working life (45–64 years), while they are significantly lower among young people, particularly those under 25, and among the elderly.

In light of the income inequalities, empowerment is fundamental in AE. It can strengthen autonomy, awareness of one's skills, and the ability to access skilled job opportunities, especially for population groups with lower income capacity. The integration of training and empowerment is therefore considered an essential tool for reducing inequalities and promoting socio-economic inclusion.

The linguistic landscape in the region is particularly diverse. In addition to Italian, the official national language, there are several historical and minority languages. Friulian, a Romance language of historical origin, is spoken in most of the region and is recognised and protected as a regional community language. Similarly, Slovenian is spoken by Slovenian communities in areas bordering Slovenia. Finally, German is spoken in some historical-linguistic communities in mountainous areas and is also recognised as a minority language.

The Central Region in Romania

Miercurea Ciuc is the capital of Harghita County in the region of Centru, Romania. It is a medium-sized municipality in a county that remains predominantly rural and ethnically distinct within Romania. The population of Miercurea Ciuc is just under 40,000 inhabitants, with the following age structure (2021 census): children (0–14): ~15 percent, working age (15–64): ~63 percent, older adults (65+): ~21 percent, indicating an ageing population with a significant share above working age. In 2023, Harghita County had a population of 291,000 inhabitants, ranking 33rd out of 42 counties in Romania. The county accounted for 12.8 percent of the population of the Central Region, but only 1.5 percent of the national population, indicating a limited demographic weight at national level. With a low population density of 43.9 inhabitants/km², well below the national and regional average, and a predominantly rural population (59.3 percent), access to AE

opportunities is uneven, particularly in rural areas. These characteristics highlight the need for flexible, locally accessible, and non-formal education provision.

According to forecasts at the National Institute of Statistics, Harghita County could lose 3.0 percent of its current population by 2030 and 21.4 percent by 2060. This trend is based on both a decline in the birth rate and migration. Harghita County overall exhibits negative natural growth and a declining population due to low birth rates and accelerated ageing, particularly in the 30–34 age group—a signal of outward migration for employment or education. In Miercurea Ciuc, there is a slight predominance of women (52.9 percent) over men (47.1 percent). This gender balance impacts AE demand, as women often participate at higher rates in community-oriented education, but may face barriers tied to care responsibilities, especially in rural families.

These demographic realities have direct implications for AE: the shrinking young adult population reduces the pool for formal and post-school training; a stronger presence of older learners suggests priority demand for re-skilling or lifelong learning programmes aimed at workers transitioning later in life or pensioners seeking active inclusion; continued outmigration may reflect mismatches between local skills and job opportunities, making AE instrumental for retention and labour market relevance.

Harghita is among Romania’s most ethnically homogeneous Hungarian majority regions. According to the 2021 census, about 72 percent of Miercurea Ciuc’s population identify as ethnic Hungarians, 15 percent as Romanians, and smaller proportions as Roma and others. At the county level, ethnic Hungarians constitute approximately 85 percent of the population, compared to roughly 13 percent Romanians. This has important effects on AE in terms of language: Hungarian is the predominant language at home. Educational materials, community outreach, and learning support services must be bilingual or culturally adapted to effectively engage major social segments. Cultural identity and language inclusion can influence participation, particularly for Romanian speakers or other minorities.

Data specific to income show generally lower wage levels compared to the national average, with rural and urban disparities. Romanian national employment data show unemployment and income pressures in rural areas are generally higher than in urban areas. Harghita’s economic scale is modest — ranked in lower GDP per capita brackets among Romanian counties — indicating lower average prosperity and resources for self-funded education. Harghita’s cultural life includes active community events, and regional authorities often promote intercultural projects (e.g. entrepreneurial education initiatives). However, rural residents have limited access to formal institutions, emphasising the role of flexible, inclusive adult education that accommodates work, family, and local lifestyles.

National unemployment in Romania was approximately 5.4 percent in late 2024, a moderate level, though local variations are likely, with higher rural unemployment. Historical trends suggest that unemployment impacts populations differently by education level, with those having lower formal qualifications more affected — a pattern likely mirrored in rural Harghita. AE can mitigate labour market vulnerabilities by upgrading skills and supporting transition into employment or new sectors of the labour market.

The region of Eastern Slovenia

Eastern Slovenia is one of Slovenia’s two NUTS-2 regions. It includes eight sub-regions (Pomurska, Podravska, Koroška, Savinjska, Zasavska, Posavska, Jugovzhodna Slovenija, and Primorsko-notranjska) and is

characterised by a diverse demographic and socio-economic profile compared to the national average (Republic of Slovenia, 2023). National cohesion policies classify Eastern Slovenia as a less developed region relative to Western Slovenia. According to the most recent estimates, Slovenia has a total population of 2.12 million people (2025 estimate), with Eastern Slovenia accounting for around 1.10 million inhabitants in 2020. The population distribution reflects a combination of urban centres (e.g. Maribor, Celje, Velenje) and extensive rural areas, leading to significant internal variations in demographic dynamics and access to services (Republic of Slovenia, 2023).

Demographic data for Slovenia show a long-term trend of population ageing. At the national level, the share of individuals aged 65 and older has been gradually increasing, while younger age cohorts are shrinking, driven in part by low fertility rates and internal migration towards urban areas. Although regional data for Eastern Slovenia are not directly published in the available national releases, the high proportion of rural and semi-rural settlements suggests that ageing pressures are at least as significant in Eastern Slovenia as elsewhere in the country.

This demographic ageing has important implications for AE demand: older adults often face greater barriers to participation in formal and non-formal education due to time constraints, technological barriers, or health-related issues, but they also represent a growing target group for lifelong learning policies.

Eastern Slovenia's demographic profile intersects with socio-economic challenges. Earlier regional development data indicate that Eastern Slovenia's GDP per capita stands below that of Western Slovenia and the EU average, reflecting structural disparities in economic development. (For example, 2018 regional data placed Eastern Slovenia's GDP per head significantly below the EU benchmark, a proxy for persistent regional economic lags.)

Labour market data illustrate why AE is strongly connected to employment policy. In Slovenia, the unemployment rate in 2024 was 3.7 percent, with around 38,000 unemployed persons on average (survey measure), while employment reached one of the highest levels in the last decade. At the same time, (registered) unemployment remains an important indicator for programme planning. In 2024, the Employment Service reported an annual average of 45,982 registered unemployed persons, and the profile of registered unemployment highlights governance-relevant target groups: 41.9 percent long-term unemployed, 37.6 percent aged 50+, and 19.5 percent aged 15–29.

These patterns are highly relevant to Eastern Slovenia, where demographic ageing and rural settlement patterns amplify the importance of accessible, locally coordinated pathways into learning and training. Governance therefore needs to align with labour market measures while also ensuring that community-based learning and inclusion-oriented programmes are available beyond strict employability goals.

Taking into account demographic and socio-economic characteristics, several priority target groups for adult education in Eastern Slovenia emerge: adults with only basic education or less, who are underrepresented in formal adult education; older adults (50+), with substantially lower participation rates in formal education; individuals in rural and remote areas, where geographic barriers and limited local provision reduce accessibility; and jobseekers and long-term unemployed adults who may require retraining or upskilling to improve employability. These data point to the need for flexible, locally accessible AE provision, with a combination of face-to-face and digital learning formats, tailored outreach, and support services for

underserved populations. Such characteristics align with the objectives of the AEduHUBs project and provide a solid evidence base for targeted hub design in Eastern Slovenia.

Regional governance structures

The region of Styria in Austria

In Austria, the governance structure is built around a framework for public adult education (AE). This framework is regulated by the Adult Education Funding Act of 1973, which laid down the main funding principles and mechanisms, established the Federal Institute for Adult Education (Bundesinstitut für Erwachsenenbildung, Bifeb), and recognises the Austrian Conference of Adult Education (Konferenz der Erwachsenenbildung Österreichs, KEBÖ) as the main umbrella interest organisation. The Department of Adult Education in the Ministry for Women, Science and Research governs the Bifeb as a subordinate agency. The task of the Bifeb is the professionalisation of AE and, among other things, it provides a broad range of courses for AE professionals. Together with the KEBÖ, Bifeb forms the Cooperative System of Adult Education (Kooperatives System der Erwachsenenbildung). This cooperative structure develops and implements initiatives for professionalisation and quality assurance. Ö-Cert, Austria's national quality assurance framework, and the Austrian Academy of Continuing Education (Weiterbildungsakademie Österreich, wba) provide accreditation for providers and professionals, while Level-Up is the state programme for adult basic education (ABE). All three of these agencies are part of a newly formed central governance structure under the auspices of the ministerial department.

Regional governments play a role in the promotion and funding of AE, especially when funding or accreditation are regulated by laws according to which the federal government and regional governments must share their contributions (e.g. Ö-Cert and Level-Up). An example of promotion is the LLL Strategy – The Future of Adult Education in Styria (LLL-Strategie – Zukunft Erwachsenenbildung Steiermark), which was developed by the regional government of Styria and defines lines of action for regional AE providers. The network Weiter.Bildung brings together the regional Working Unions for Adult Education, the Regional Working Unions for Public Libraries, and representatives of the regional governments. For the region of Styria, interests in this network are represented by the Styrian Network of Education (Steirisches Bildungsnetzwerk), which operates the Continuing Education Navigator (Weiterbildungsnavi), an online platform that provides information about courses in the region. A complementary actor at the regional level in Styria are the semi-public Regional Development Agencies, which have departments for educational and vocational guidance.

Austrian AE is characterised by a diverse and strongly corporatist institutional landscape. Among the most important corporatist actors is the KEBÖ, which brings together the country's ten largest public AE associations (erwachsenenbildung.at, n.d.-b, n. p.). They seek to strengthen and expand civil society by promoting educational approaches based on solidarity, methods of civic participation, and collaborative processes of community engagement and knowledge sharing (Bundesinstitut für Erwachsenenbildung, 2019, p. 1). At the regional level, the AE organisations of the Chamber of Labour, the Folk High School (Volkshochschule, VHS) and the Institute for Adult Vocational Education (Berufsförderungsinstitut, Bfi), and of the Chamber of Commerce, the Institute for Economic Promotion (Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitut, Wifl),

are important. They are responsible for information and guidance, as well as a broad range of courses in adult vocational education (AVE), adult basic education (ABE), and adult popular education (APE).

The Public Employment Service (Arbeitsmarktservice, AMS) also plays an important role. It supports job seekers as well as employed individuals through a range of guidance, training, and labour market services, and is the quantitatively most important funding agency for AE, especially for private sector AE organisations. These organisations typically focus on vocational and workplace-related continuing education. Compared with many public providers, private-sector institutions are often able to respond more quickly to changes in labour market demands. This flexibility is particularly important in a context where the acquisition of practical, labour market-relevant skills has become a central objective of education policy.

The region of Eastern and Midland in Ireland

Adult education (AE) in Ireland has two strongly visible orientations. The first orientation is officially called Further Education & Training (FET). It is largely formalised and concentrates on adult vocational education (AVE), including Post-Leaving Certificates (PLCs), apprenticeships, traineeships, and short-term labour market-related training. The second orientation is non-formal and focuses on reconnecting adults with learning activities. In particular, this orientation addresses adults who have been socially marginalised or marginalised within the education system. These groups of adults are supported in returning to non-formal education, in the acquisition of foundational literacy, and in connecting with learning activities in their community. This is also referred to as Community Education.

There is a pronounced national governance structure. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), within the national ministry of the same name, is responsible for national policy, funding, and strategic planning across FET. It allocates funding and provides direction to the agencies and bodies tasked with implementing programmes. Another key actor is SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority. It is a state agency responsible for planning, funding, and coordinating FET nationally. It manages budgets for FET, as well as for adult basic education (ABE), literacy programmes, and Community Education. Moreover, SOLAS publishes labour-market-aligned FET plans that guide the work of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Ireland's 16 ETBs deliver FET programmes at the regional level. ETBs are responsible for implementing the strategies developed by SOLAS, ensuring alignment with labour market demands and national priorities. They deliver a wide range of programmes, including PLC courses, apprenticeships, Community Education, and Youthreach (a two-year dual-learning programme for unemployed early school leavers). ETBs also report learner outcomes, participation numbers, and progression rates directly to SOLAS. Another public body reporting to the ministry is Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Overseeing the validation of FET programmes and ensuring quality standards across both formal and non-formal adult learning are among its main tasks. In summary, AE in Ireland is funded and supported through DFHERIS, SOLAS, ETBs, and various EU-funded initiatives available to AE providers.

Complementary to these formal actors, there are two interest organisations that should be mentioned. The first is AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland. Active since 1969, AONTAS advocates for adult learning and refers to itself as the voice of adult learning. It seeks to influence policy-making based on core values such as social justice, diversity, and feminism, and works towards social equality, inclusion, and community development. The second interest organisation is NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency.

Its mission is to raise awareness of all issues related to literacy, and especially of the various literacy services provided by the ETBs. Furthermore, NALA provides learning opportunities through television, radio, print media, as well as through in-person and online tutoring.

The private sector plays a key role by offering workplace-based training and professional development locally, often integrated with FET, for instance through apprenticeship pathways. In addition, civil society organisations are involved in the provision of literacy programmes and Community Education at the local level.

The region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in Italy

Italy has a rather formal and state-led adult learning system (ALS). At the national level, the Fornero Reform of 2012 represented a significant step in the development of adult education (AE) policies, particularly for unemployed people and for workers in precarious situations. This regulatory framework is complemented by the investment strategies of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, PNRR). This plan devotes considerable attention to training and skills, with repercussions at the regional level, including in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG) region.

The governance of AE on a national scale is structured along two lines. On the one hand, the Ministry for Education, Universities and Research (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, MIUR) and the Regional School Offices (Uffici Scolastici Regionali, USR) regulate the Regional Centres for Adult Education (Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti, CPIA) and the formal AE courses they offer. CPIAs are public schools which provide adult basic education (ABE) at primary and secondary level, adult vocational education (AVE), or language and cultural education for foreign citizens. On the other hand, national regulations and EU programmes (Erasmus+, European Social Fund, and the PNRR) define objectives, standards, and priorities in non-formal AE, especially lifelong learning, digital skills, and professionalisation.

At the regional level, the Autonomous Region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia (RFVG) plays a central role in organising, financing, and accrediting AVE courses. The regional vocational training plan, in line with national legislation, coordinates AE, pays particular attention to rural and mountain areas, and promotes social inclusion measures. The RFVG has several responsibilities: it manages a regional training catalogue, intended for employed and unemployed people and companies; issues accreditations to training institutions which provide publicly funded courses; and implements EU programmes. Furthermore, there is the regional agency for employment and training (Lavoro FVG), which is responsible for fund management, monitoring, accreditation, and the IVC Service (Identification, Validation, and Certification of Skills). The RFVG also defines specific guidelines, such as the strategic plan We learn & work in FVG (Apprendiamo & lavoriamo in FVG), and coordinates the implementation of training courses throughout even the most remote areas of the region together with local authorities. Employment centres (Centri per l'Impiego, CPI), which are located in several municipalities, also play an important role, as they coordinate training activities in the region and manage AE funding. Among the corporatist stakeholders, chambers of commerce, trade unions, and trade associations (e.g. the Crafts Association, Confartigianato) promote training courses that correspond with local labour market needs.

Authorities at provincial or municipal level also play an important role in coordinating AE, especially in rural and mountainous areas, by offering career guidance services, participating in the co-design of training courses, and supporting non-formal training, such as workshops and seminars.

Providers of AE are represented by a network of accredited training institutions (e.g. AD Formandum, ENAIP FVG, CEFAP FVG, CIVIFORM, IAL FVG, or CRAMARS). These institutions provide free courses for residents of FVG, as part of programmes such as Piazza GOL, digital skills courses, professional development, or sector-specific qualifications. Civil society stakeholders — local associations, community centres, and social cooperatives — are actively involved in organising AE, often in collaboration with public bodies. Their contribution is particularly important in responding to specific social needs and promoting active community participation.

Finally, private sector companies are a key element of the regional ALS. Companies, particularly in the tourism, agriculture, and crafts sectors, collaborate with training institutions to develop courses tailored to their needs. The focus is currently on digitalisation, technological innovation, and workplace safety. In FVG, this collaboration takes the form of in-house training, curricular and extracurricular internships, and specific courses for technical and digital skills.

The Central region in Romania

Adult education (AE) in the town of Miercurea Ciuc and Harghita County is embedded within a multi-level governance environment shaped by national laws, EU programmes, county strategies, local authority initiatives, and labour market agencies. However, unlike formal school and university education systems, AE is not yet institutionalised as a standalone sector with its own robust statutory framework at the county level—instead, it is embedded within broader institutional structures concerning education, the labour market, and social inclusion.

At the national level, AE in Romania falls within a regulated but cross-sectoral policy context involving multiple ministries and agencies. The Ministry of Education sets formal standards for continuing education, lifelong learning, and vocational training under national education legislation, and is responsible for compulsory education and certification frameworks. The National Labour Agency (Agenția Națională pentru Ocuparea Forței de Muncă, ANOFM) administers programmes for adult vocational education (AVE), including retraining and upskilling, often financed by EU funds (e.g. FSE+ through “Educație și Ocupare” programmes). Harghita’s ANOFM currently lists national projects such as COMPETENT – training for competitiveness, and START – qualifications and employment support, indicating structured adult learning initiatives aligned with labour market integration. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Human Capital Operational Programme co-finance second chance education and reintegration education (e.g. REAL – Școală deschisă pentru toate vârstele), which has supported hundreds of adults and young people who left school early to return to education.

Unlike EU countries with dedicated AE statutes, Romania’s governance typically integrates AE within formal vocational education law, labour market policy, and EU operational programmes. This means AE providers must interact with national accreditation authorities, with adult learners eligible for subsidised training through labour offices (ANOFM) or funded projects, rather than through a distinct county-level regulation. Nevertheless, AE organisations can offer EU project-based non-formal AE opportunities to all those interested. Financing for AE in Harghita County is project-based and mixed, rather than sustained by a dedicated county budget allocation. The mix includes EU funds, national government funding, county and local co-financing, and private sector contributions and partnerships.

At the regional/county level, the Harghita County Council (Consiliul Județean Harghita) and the Harghita County School Inspectorate are central to coordination and project implementation for education — including AE components when tied to workforce skills, inclusion, or digital competencies. The County Council develops county strategies (e.g. youth strategy) and supports educational projects, although AE per se does not have dedicated county legislation. The Harghita County School Inspectorate co-manages projects like the REAL initiative, which illustrates local implementation capacity for adult reintegration and second-chance education. Municipalities (e.g. Miercurea Ciuc local council) coordinate local implementation of programmes and partner on projects with county authorities, NGOs, and private actors.

Beyond public bodies, labour market actors and intermediaries play vital roles. The ANOFM Harghita implements labour-market-related programmes. As corporatist actors, the chamber of commerce influences demand for AVE through partnerships, especially for job-linked learning, apprenticeships, and upskilling. A consortium established for dual education includes local firms and AE providers, indicating collaboration between public and private stakeholders to bridge education and workforce needs. Civil society organisations — mostly NGOs, community organisations, and cultural centres — deliver non-formal AE, often supported indirectly by funding or partnerships (e.g. cultural literacy, lifelong learning workshops).

The region of Eastern Slovenia

In Slovenia, adult education (AE) is organised as part of a broader lifelong learning (LLL) system, integrating formal education, non-formal education, and informal learning. The system is coordinated primarily at the national level, but implementation is strongly dependent on local and regional contexts — particularly in Eastern Slovenia, where rural dispersion and demographic ageing shape demand, access, and participation.

National authorities set strategic directions and provide the legal and funding frameworks through the Resolution on the National Programme of Adult Education 2022–2030 (Resolucija o nacionalnem programu izobraževanja odraslih, ReNPIO 2022–2030) and the Annual Adult Education Programme (Letni program izobraževanja odraslih, LPIO). For ReNPIO, an expert-level advisory structure, the Council of Experts for Adult Education, supports policy coherence and monitoring. Slovenia governs AE through a layered structure combining strategic national planning, annual implementation programmes, and local public-interest measures. ReNPIO is the key national policy instrument, which defines public interests, sets goals and indicators, identifies priority areas and target groups, and specifies coordination and monitoring arrangements. It explicitly describes how national and local planning interact. At the national level, the ministry responsible (currently within the education portfolio) prepares the proposal in cooperation with other ministries and government bodies. The programme is adopted at state level, while annual implementation is operationalised by the LPIO. At the local level, municipalities can define public interests and adopt their own annual AE programmes, which is particularly relevant for ensuring service availability in rural areas and for groups at higher risk of exclusion.

This governance model reflects the cross-sectoral nature of AE: it is not only a topic of education policy, but also intersects with employment policy, social inclusion, health, migration, and regional development. ReNPIO 2022–2030 even frames the need for inter-ministerial coordination and stable, multi-source financing, acknowledging the need for cross-policy-domain cooperation.

The Andragoški center Slovenije (Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, ACS) is Slovenia's central public institution for AE development. Among other functions, the ACS maintains national information and quality-

support mechanisms, supports outreach and awareness-raising, and develops national tools that help structure the AE marketplace for learners and providers (e.g. national information platforms for learning opportunities and guidance). Another example is the ACS national portal “Kam po znanje”, a central portal or digital hub for AE provision in Slovenia. The portal brings together information on institutions and their programmes across both formal and non-formal contexts, and serves as a transparency and access tool. This type of national digital infrastructure is relevant to the AEduHUBs concept, as it illustrates how Slovenia already supports information accessibility — while the AEduHUBs approach can strengthen local, relational, and physical access through hub-based service models.

There is a mixed provider landscape with typically public AE providers, including Folk High Schools (Ljudske univerze), but also secondary schools, higher education institutions, private providers, NGOs, and community organisations. Providers deliver general education, literacy and basic skills, second-chance education, language learning, digital skills, vocational training, and a range of community-based learning opportunities. The practical implementation challenges in Eastern Slovenia result from the combination of smaller municipalities and dispersed settlements. Even where provision exists, governance must address accessibility barriers such as transport and time constraints.

The Employment Service of Slovenia (Zavod Republike Slovenije za zaposlovanje, ZRSZ) and other labour market stakeholders are important actors. A large part of AE demand is linked to labour market needs and active labour market policy (ALMP). The ZRSZ not only monitors labour market trends but also supports training and upskilling pathways for jobseekers and vulnerable groups. Labour market contexts matter for governance because they shape funding streams, target groups, and policy priorities, particularly around reskilling and upskilling.

Funding for AE in Slovenia is mixed. ReNPIO 2022–2030 sets out that public-interest AE is financed through the state budget, municipal budgets, and other sources, including EU funding. In practice, this results in a combination of core public funding (public service functions and priority programmes), project-based funding (including EU cohesion funds and other European schemes), labour-market-related funding (training linked to employability and ALMP), and participant/employer contributions for some types of non-formal learning.

Slovenia has a well-established network of Folk High Schools (Ljudske univerze), which represent one of the most important pillars of public AE provision. Folk High Schools are typically established by municipalities or groups of municipalities and are distributed across the entire country to ensure local accessibility. They are important because they deliver education as a public good rather than a purely market-driven service. Their core mission is to ensure inclusive, locally accessible, and flexible learning opportunities for adults, regardless of age, prior education, employment status, or place of residence. Folk High Schools in Slovenia are organised within a national professional and advocacy network coordinated by the Association of Folk High Schools of Slovenia (Zveza ljudskih univerz Slovenije, ZLUS).

Demanded for adult education

Demand structure

According to the regional reports, the demands reflect what is being discussed in economic, political, civil society, and AE contexts. Notably, the needs of the labour market were emphasised in Ireland, Italy, and Romania. Beyond this commonality, differences can be observed. In Romania, local economic structures

were highlighted, while in Italy, there was an additional demand for social inclusion. In Ireland, governmental strategies play a significant role. From the summary of the structure and governance of AE, we can infer that in Romania, the market is considered to coordinate demand and supply, while in Italy, it is the government in combination with European programmes, and in Ireland, it is the government in combination with state-related organisations and interest groups.

In Slovenia, too, the needs of the labour market were mentioned, yet they are communicated primarily through a national strategy, which appears to reflect a broader variety of issues to which AE is expected to contribute. In addition to responding to labour market needs, increasing participation rates in AE, raising educational attainment, and strengthening basic skills are also among the demands. As we have already learned, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education is an important actor, which communicates demands, for instance through the ReNPIO Plan for Adult Education.

With regard to the Austrian region of Styria, the situation was described in a completely different way. Here, regional AE statistics were used to argue that educational opportunities not exclusively related to careers are in high demand. This was explained by reference to the strategic actions of AE providers, which led to an increase in supply and, consequently, created new demands among learners. A regional strategy exists in Styria and defines political demands, but its relevance within the field of AE is rather low. One explanation for the comparatively marginal role of the labour market is that the governance structures in Austria are divided, so that ABE and APE are coordinated politically differently from AVE.

Demanded areas and topics

The Austrian example reveals how the demand structure translates into specific areas and topics. The area in greatest demand from learners in Styria is adult popular education (APE), with a focus on learning for personal development beyond the labour market. Topics related to health, well-being, and sport are in demand among learners. The regional government also prioritises civic education and adult basic education (ABE). Digital literacy is a topic of particular relevance in this respect, while sustainability is a topic that can be related to civic education in the broadest sense. Interestingly, the demands of learners and those of the regional government do not correspond. We assume that this is a result of the marginal role of the government, which does not provide much funding and support, compared to the stronger role that stakeholders and AE providers themselves have in coordinating the demand and supply of AE.

In Italy, Romania, and Slovenia, services in the areas of ABE, adult vocational education (AVE), and APE are in demand. Up- and reskilling of the employed and unemployed workforce, short-term work-related training, and company-based training were mentioned in the area of AVE in all three countries. Digital skills, entrepreneurship, and employability are topics that were emphasised in these regional reports. Differences are visible regarding ABE. The Italian schemes for ABE and second-chance education are formalised in CPIA and relate to the acquisition of primary and secondary level certificates. For Romania, the need for second-chance education was also highlighted, but, in addition, labour market reintegration was mentioned as an issue. Most likely as a result of the different demographic situation, the Slovenian regional report indicated the need to address integration-related learning in ABE. With respect to APE, the situation is similar to that in Austria, at least in Slovenia and Italy, where APE is expected to facilitate continuous updating, social participation, and personal development (e.g. well-being, active ageing, or agriculture and food). In the Romanian regional report, cultural learning was prioritised. The means to address these topics are similar in all three countries; community education appears to be the preferred approach.

Community education is also a widespread approach in Ireland and is employed with regard to ABE and APE. Both focus on literacy, numeracy, and the inclusion of marginalised groups within the population. As noted in the previous section, AVE is coordinated in Ireland by a national agency. Because of this, it follows a consolidated definition of demands. Up- and reskilling are important, as are apprenticeships and micro-credentials. The topics of digital literacy, green skills, and business innovation are to be addressed in the area of AVE to respond to the needs of the Irish labour market.

Table 4. Overview of the demand structure and the demanded areas and topics

Region	Demand structure	AE areas and topics	Specific topics
Styria Austria	Educational opportunities that are not exclusively career-related Expansion of supply contributes to demand coordinated by stakeholders	APE: Personal development, civic education ABE: Literacy	Digital literacy Health, well-being, sports, sustainability
Eastern and Midland Ireland	reflect labour market trends, government strategy, and ongoing requirements for upskilling Coordinated by the state and by stakeholders	AVE: Up-/reskilling, micro-credentials, apprenticeships ABE: Literacy, numeracy, inclusion	Digital literacy, green skills, business innovation, robotics
Friuli-Venezia Giulia Italy	reflect the needs of the labour market, with a particular focus on vocational training and social inclusion European and national funding schemes contribute to demand coordinated by governments	ABE: Formal education AVE: Up-/reskilling, inclusion – employability, company-based training, short-term training APE: Social participation, inclusion, continuous updating	Basic and advanced digital skills, soft-skills, regionally specific skills (e.g. tourism) Agriculture and food, well-being, healthy lifestyle, personal care
Central Romania	reflect local economic structures and labour market needs Regional specificities contribute to demand coordinated by the market	AVE: Job-related training, up-/reskilling ABE: Second chance education, labour market re-integration APE: Cultural and community education	Digital skills Entrepreneurship Employability Cultural literacy
Eastern Slovenia	increasing participation in LLL, strengthening basic skills and educational attainment, responsiveness to labour market needs Regional specificities and national strategies contribute to demand coordinated by the government and stakeholders.	ABE: Literacy, numeracy, digital skills; second chance education; integration-related learning AVE: Up-/reskilling, job-related learning APE: Community education	Digital literacy, language learning, well-being, civic participation and active ageing

Good practice and challenges

Strengths

The regional reports present a picture of the strengths of AE in the five regions that is consistent with the impression one might gain from the presentation of the governance structures. In Italy and Slovenia, where either the national governance structure is pronounced (Slovenia) or the regional governance structure is pronounced (Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy), these structures were identified as strengths. In concrete terms, it is the Slovenian strategic framework, consisting of the ReNPIO and the LPIO, in combination with the professional expertise and support provided by the ACS and the diverse provider landscape, that forms a kind of backbone for AE provision. Another strength is the transparency achieved through the national information platform, where learners can obtain an overview of guidance services, courses, and so on. Most importantly for regional AEduHUBs, the Slovenian Folk High Schools provide a coherent network in which diverse learner needs can be addressed through flexible provision.

For the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG), the synergy between the regional government's work (e.g. strategies, programmes, accreditation), training providers, and local companies is perceived to enable greater labour market responsiveness in AE provision. The second strength of the FVG region is also related to cooperation: local projects involving social organisations, communities, and municipalities positively affect the social inclusion of people living in very rural areas.

Cooperation at the regional level was also reported as a strength in the Romanian case. Cross-sector partnerships between public authorities, schools, NGOs, and businesses enhance practical outcomes (e.g. dual education consortia). Another strength identified was the integration of EU programmes at the regional level, which is an important aspect with regard to broadening access to AE. This is also consistent with the findings from other sections, namely that there is no specifically dedicated governance structure at the national level in Romania.

The Irish report identifies several key strengths based on an AONTAS study. Learners consistently reported feeling respected, supported, and included by tutors and staff, with 95 percent indicating positive interactions with teaching personnel. Beyond the acquisition of knowledge, participation in AE was associated with increased self-confidence, a more positive outlook on the future, and a stronger sense of belonging, with 64 percent of respondents reporting improved confidence and 31 percent experiencing enhanced social connectedness (AONTAS, 2024). Many learners described their courses as transformative, noting that education provided a second chance and contributed meaningfully to their personal and social development. These findings highlight that adult education in Ireland extends beyond skill acquisition and qualification attainment, serving as a catalyst for empowerment, mental well-being, and community engagement.

For the Austrian region of Styria, the diversity of adult education provision is highlighted as a particular strength, extending beyond immediate vocational training. This includes, among other things, programmes focusing on personal development and civic education (APE), as well as literacy (ABE). Other specific areas of interest include the development of digital skills, health and well-being, sport, and sustainability. Expanding the range of educational opportunities helps strengthen demand for adult education and coordinate it in collaboration with the stakeholders involved.

Challenges

While the challenges appear to be tied to contextual characteristics, they are rather similar across all five regional cases. They fall within five categories: stability of funding, geographical access, addressing hard-to-reach groups, the public image of adult education, and dealing with diverse learners. The Romanian regional report was the only one to mention the lack of national governance structures as a challenge, because the spread of the AE agenda across various policy areas (e.g. labour market, social inclusion, education) results in weak accountability.

Despite the existence of public funding possibilities in four out of five regions, decreasing public budgets make AE providers increasingly dependent on EU project-based funding. Or, as in the case of Ireland, it might lead to unequal distribution of funds across the various regions. This not only puts providers in constant competition for financial resources, but it also makes longer- and even mid-term planning difficult, consequently affecting both organisational structures (e.g. staff) and the continuity of AE provision. A lack of continuous provision, in turn, has negative repercussions for learners because it makes the outlining of coherent educational pathways and the creation of transparent communication more difficult.

Not surprisingly, geographical access is one of the main challenges, especially when communities are spread across large distances or are located in places which are hard to reach by public or even private transport. Ensuring that adults living far from the location of an AE provider can participate in courses, for example, was reported as an issue in four out of five regional reports. These issues become even more severe when there is insufficient digital infrastructure and/or a lack of digital skills among the population living in rural areas — as reported by the Italian project partners. Developing flexible solutions regarding online and in-person teaching, or the times and places of courses, is the challenge that was mentioned in the Romanian report.

Reaching out to adults living in geographically remote areas, to those with low educational attainment, or to adults who have been socially marginalised was also included in the list of challenges. Setting up support that integrates outreach and guidance, to show possible educational pathways, is needed but in practice is hard to realise. To some extent, this is connected to the challenge of raising awareness for adult education. The public image of adult education needs to be addressed to make the value it provides to individuals, communities, the labour market, and society as a whole comprehensible. This is challenging because of weak public visibility and recognition, and an undervaluation when compared with school or higher education.

Lastly, it was mentioned that the diversity of requirements among learners poses challenges. What learners bring to courses has apparently changed, especially since the COVID pandemic. A greater need to balance work, life, and education (e.g. childcare), and to reach locations via public transport, have been identified as challenges on the side of learners that extend towards the providers. Greater sensitivity to mental health issues is also needed, but poses challenges to providers.

Table 5. Overview of the main strenghts and challenges

	Strength	Challenges
Styria Austria	- Strong national agencies for professionalization and quality assurance - Regional strategy and a regional network for the promotion of AE	- Lack of public funding affects org. structures, long-term planning - Increasing demands for work-life-balance and mental support - Limited public visibility and recognition of AE affects addressing hard-to-reach
Eastern and Midland Ireland	- More than skills and qualifications, serving empowerment, mental well-being, and community engagement - Learner-orientation, supportive, and respectful practice by professionals	- Distributive justice and accuracy of public funding for regions - Diverse learner requirements concerning childcare, transport, or mental health - Public undervaluation of AE compared to school or higher education
Friuli-Venezia Giulia Italy	- Labour market responsiveness through synergy of RFVG, training providers, local companies - Social inclusion through projects involving social organisations, communities, municipalities	- Geographical access of AE and an insufficient digital infrastructure - A lack in digital literacy in rural areas resulting in low job chances - Dependence on public and EU funding weakens continuity of AE provision
Central Romania	- Broadening access through regional EU-programme integration, - Enhancement of practical outcomes through cross-sector partnerships	- Lack of specific governance for AE results in diffuse accountability - Dependence of project-based funding weakens continuity of AE provision - Lack of flexible provision reduced access to AE in rural areas
Eastern Slovenia	- Strategic framework (ReNPIO, LPIO) combined with professional support (CSA) and a diverse provider landscape, - Transparency of provision through national information platform - Flexibility and multiple entry points for addressing diverse learner needs in Folk High Schools	- Ensuring geographic accessibility to AE in dispersed rural areas - Dependence on project-based funding weakens continuity of AE provision - Integrated outreach and guidance to support hard-to-reach groups

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Field research results

In this chapter, we present the most significant insights gained from the qualitative content analysis of the interviews with decision-makers, adult education providers, adult education professionals, and adult learners. These insights form the basis for drawing conclusions regarding the Training Programme. Our findings are summarised in four main categories: AEduHUBs design; preconditions for establishing and maintaining AEduHUBs; learners' perspectives on AEduHUBs; and the roles of decision-makers, providers, and professionals in establishing and maintaining AEduHUBs. We proceed through these categories in this order. For reasons of transparency, we have included the respective questions from the semi-structured questionnaire at the beginning of each category.

AEduHUBs design

Understandings of adult education

- What do you understand by adult education?
- What characterises adult education in your understanding?

Applying theoretical points of reference to guide our analysis and inductive coding (Bagnall & Hodge, 2022), we were able to define five different, yet in some respects overlapping, understandings of adult education: the functional, the disciplinary, the developmental, the emancipatory, and the formalistic understanding.

The functional understanding was the most prominent in the interviews. It is based on the following assumption: When participants have the chance to learn what is relevant to society and to themselves, and gain adequate skills so that they can respond effectively to demands in the labour market and in private life, this leads to increased societal participation, improved career opportunities, a better work-life balance, and eventually to social inclusion and social cohesion. AE services should therefore be designed to provide learning that can be directly transferred from the learning setting into any context of professional or private practice.

The disciplinary understanding could be identified in only one interview with a decision-maker. Despite this, it is significant because it represents a very specific idea of what is needed for participation in a regional community. Its main assumption is that adult education needs to be focused on disciplinary content, which mainly manifests in cultural or scientific practices. In the interview, these contents included regional (minority or traditional) languages, the history of regional culture and development, regional forms of crafts and arts, as well as regional geography.

The developmental understanding was significant in the interviews, but not as prominent as the functional and the formalistic understanding. Central to the developmental understanding is the orientation towards learners' needs and experiences. These should be taken as starting points in the planning and design of adult education services. While learning content is backgrounded, dialogical facilitation and the promotion of belonging to a shared community are foregrounded and emphasised as didactical and methodological key elements of adult education services. With this understanding, the aim is to support learners in finding their way through, and their place in, society in general and in the regional community in particular.

The emancipatory understanding could also be identified only once, just like the disciplinary understanding. Interestingly, the emancipatory understanding was communicated in an interview with a learner. At the heart of this understanding is the intention to provide learning that is critical of given social conditions and supports learners in overcoming social restrictions they experience in their professional or private life, as well as regarding their participation in society. In the interview, this was envisaged with regard to women who should be supported in returning to working life after having been at home for a longer period of time.

The formalistic understanding was also dominant in the interviews. It was not reconstructed by reference to existing literature but directly from interviewees' statements. They referred to types of AE such as formal, non-formal, and informal learning, or areas of AE such as vocational education, skills training, or community education. When goals were mentioned, these were rather broad and unspecific, for instance, increased productivity or regional development. Often, interviewees referred to laws, statutes, or national and regional strategies.

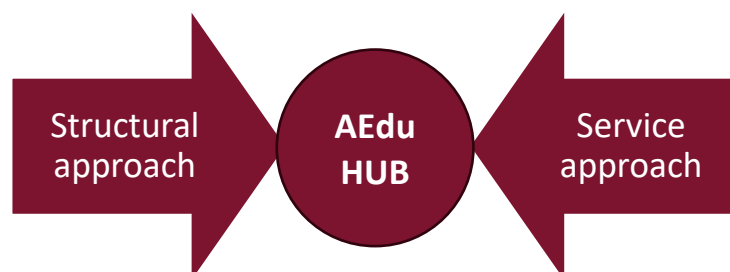
Approaching AEduHUBs

- What do you associate with the idea of an adult education hub?
- What could be the purpose of an adult education hub?

We understand an approach to represent a certain way of defining the understanding and purpose of adult education and of an AEduHUB, and to use this definition to make arguments and raise claims about addressees, services, benefits, and desirable features of an AEduHUB.

In the analysis, it became clear that what interviewees associated with AEduHUBs and what they considered to be their purpose cannot be analytically separated but need to be integrated into one analytical category. Answers can be understood on two levels: the approaches concerning the focus in the design of AEduHUBs (question regarding understanding) and the orientations that the services of an AEduHUB should follow (question regarding purpose). As far as the approaches are concerned, we were able to identify two: a structural approach and a service approach. As indicated in Figure 3, these two approaches look at the same thing—an AEduHUB—but view it from different perspectives and therefore have different foci.

Figure 6. Approaches concerning the design of AEduHUBs



Structural approach: Interviewees envisaged AEduHUBs as some sort of physical spatial structure or some kind of digital structure. They referred to images of laboratories, networks, coordinating nodes, meeting points, learning centres, or information platforms. The focus in their statements was mainly on what an AEduHUB could look like; in other words, the emphasis was on the material or structural manifestation.

Service approach: Interviewees talked about AEduHUBs as providers of services to learners or to adult education professionals, respectively. Regardless of the specific question concerning the services (see below 4.1.3), interviewees focused, when communicating their image of AEduHUBs, on what is provided to people; in other words, the emphasis was on learning and development provision.

The purpose ascribed to an AEduHUB by the interviewees followed six orientations. Not surprisingly, these were based on the functional, developmental, emancipatory, and formalistic understandings of AE. In addition, two more orientations could be reconstructed: the professional development orientation and the public relations orientation. Both were embedded within a structural approach to AEduHUBs.

Professional development orientation: Moving away from the image of an entity exclusively for learners, a group of interviewees emphasised that an AEduHUB should be a space or a network where adult education professionals can come together, exchange experiences, and learn from each other to improve their own work.

Public relations orientation: It is noteworthy that some interviewees considered the purpose of an AEduHUB to be an entity that concentrates on public relations. The main tasks should then be the promotion of AE in general and raising awareness of the value and benefits of AE among potential stakeholders as well as among the specific addressees of AEduHUBs.

Services provided in AEduHUBs

- What could be the service provided by an adult education hub?

Because nearly all interviewees named several types of services they considered adequate for an AEduHUB, we decided to provide a quantitative account instead of a qualitative analysis. This quantitative account is displayed in Table 2, where the number of times each service was mentioned is listed, with the most frequently named services at the top. This list is of particular relevance to the Methodological Design of the Training Programme because it allows us to focus on selected services and provide learning content to improve participants' competences regarding the implementation of these services.

The list indicates the importance of four different types of services:

- The provision of structured learning, which requires people involved in AEduHUBs to have competences in needs assessment and programme planning in order to design tailored learning opportunities (Module 1 and Module 4 of the Training Programme).
- Guidance, counselling, and mentoring, which require knowledge about the field of adult education and education pathways, as well as competences concerning the identification of learner needs and skills gaps (Module 2).
- Coordinating provision and cooperating with other organisations and stakeholders, which is the basis for establishing and maintaining AEduHUBs from a structural approach (Module 3).
- The promotion of adult education, which is a matter of outreach and needs to be based on communication and motivation strategies, as well as the intention to create low-threshold access to AEduHUBs (Module 4 of the Training Programme).

Table 6. List of services named in the interviews

Type of service	Quantity in interviews
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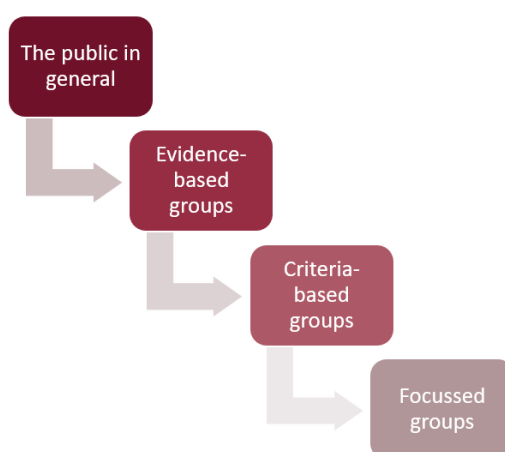
Provision of structured learning	8
Coordination and cooperation	6
Guidance, counselling, mentoring	5
Promotion of adult education	5
Information about courses	3
Equipment for self-directed learning	3
Needs analysis and labour market research	2
Spaces for socialising	1
Support for vulnerable people	1
Continuing professional development	1
Support with funding opportunities	1
Accreditation services	1

Addressees of AEduHUBs

- Which group of people would be in greatest need of an adult education hub in your region, municipality, or community?

Regarding the addressees of AEduHUBs, the interviewees outlined four options for defining target groups: the public as a whole, evidence-based groups, criteria-based groups, and focused groups. These four options represent a progression from very general to very specific, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 7. Options for the definition of addressees for AEduHUBs



The public as a whole was mentioned as a very broad group of addressees in only one interview, where it was stated that an AEduHUB should be for everyone. This includes adults from the age of 16 onwards. Young adults still in secondary education were also included, as they are in need of support and could benefit from the services.

Evidence-based groups of addressees were defined by one interviewee as groups identified using statistics or other evidence from the region. This could include data concerning formal educational attainment,

participation in non-formal learning, labour market positions, but also evidence collected in courses, such as information about learners' motivation and interests.

Criteria-based groups of addressees meant that potential participants are defined by social characteristics (e.g. those who are hard to reach). Most often, these characteristics relate to social disadvantage (e.g. unemployed people), special needs (e.g. low-skilled individuals), or a specific position within the local community (e.g. newly arrived people). These groups were often mentioned without further specification.

Focused groups of addressees were implied when interviewees referred unequivocally to clearly defined groups of people. These include unemployed or newly arrived migrants, older people in retirement, mothers returning to working life, young families establishing themselves in the community, long-term unemployed individuals at risk of social exclusion, young adults searching for orientation, and NEETs wanting to return to formal education or find a job.

Community benefits of AEduHUBs

- What could be the benefit of an adult education hub for your region, municipality, institution, or community?

This question was posed only to decision makers. Very much in line with the understandings of adult education and the approaches to AEduHUBs, we were able to arrange decision makers' statements according to three recurring categories: a functional, a developmental, and a formalistic understanding of AEduHUBs' benefits.

Functional understanding: Benefits were envisaged primarily in relation to the labour market. AEduHUBs should consequently be designed to facilitate learners' labour market performance. The main assumption was that functional learning across the lifespan leads to increased professional performance and labour market progression, which contributes to greater social cohesion and economic competitiveness.

Developmental understanding: In this understanding, living together in a community where knowledge is shared and culture is nurtured by proactive citizens was seen as the main benefit. Adopting such an understanding, development could be achieved not only for individuals in terms of personal growth, but also for local communities and even regions in terms of collective or cultural development.

Formalistic understanding: In this understanding, the benefits of AEduHUBs were considered primarily with regard to regional development demands. On the one hand, this focused on increased educational opportunities for adults in the region. On the other hand, it was considered necessary to be attractive for young families with higher levels of education, enabling them to learn about and appreciate working and living in the region. Attractiveness was not restricted to younger families but extended to older people, enabling them to feel part of and contribute to the community.

Desirable features of AEduHUBs

- If you could choose one thing an adult education hub should definitely provide or achieve, what would that be?

This category complements those concerned with the services and benefits of AEduHUBs but is more focused on overarching aspects. Four main topics emerged from the interviews. These topics should not be

understood as separate, but rather as located at different levels and serving different functions within the organizational structure of an AEduHUB. Figure 3 illustrates how these four topics relate to each other.

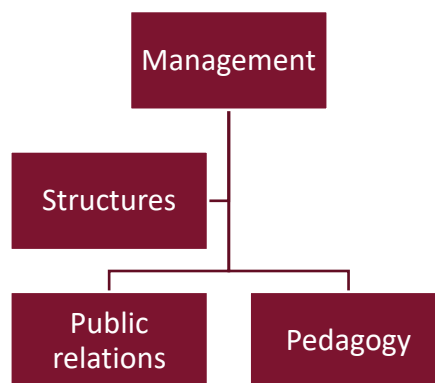
A focus on management is placed at the top because it concerns the normative and strategic aspects to be addressed in establishing and maintaining an AEduHUB. Interviewees emphasized the importance of long-term planning, with a focus on a diverse range of learner provision that is communicated transparently and implemented through cooperative structures.

A focus on structures refers to a set of responsibilities that can be allocated to certain actors or staff within an AEduHUB. Spaces where people come together, interact with others, and share similar needs, wishes, experiences, and goals to promote community building and personal growth were mentioned in the interviews as desirable features of an AEduHUB.

A focus on public relations concerns another responsibility within the organizational structure of an AEduHUB. Those in charge should ensure that more people are aware of adult education provision, its value, and its benefits (e.g. understanding that AE is for them and that it is never too late for lifelong learning). The task is to reach out to the public and raise awareness to attract learners.

A focus on pedagogy represents a further responsibility that could be established within the AEduHUB's organizational structure. Its main function is to encourage lifelong learning by developing and implementing services based on what learners need to lead a self-confident life and participate in society (e.g. a place where the needs of everyone are recognized).

Figure 8. Desirable features of an AEduHUB



AEduHUBs preconditions

General preconditions

- What would be general preconditions for establishing and operating an adult education hub in your region, municipality or community?

Regarding general preconditions, interviewees emphasized that AEduHUBs should operate based on a clear vision and strategy that define what an AEduHUB is and what its role within the local context should be, so that all relevant actors understand the value and benefits of an AEduHUB. Such a vision and strategy should also demonstrate a commitment to addressing social disadvantages, supporting local development (e.g.

communities, culture, participation), and meeting the needs of target groups. Additionally, there should be an understanding of opportunities for funding and collaboration, including the use of existing structures and resources to avoid duplication or redundancy of services.

Preconditions concerning policy

- What policies would support the establishment of an adult education hub?

When talking about policy preconditions, interviewees referred on the one hand to a general policy framework, and on the other hand to concrete policies or programmes that could serve as a more specific basis for AEduHUBs.

Within a general policy framework, the focus should be on lifelong learning opportunities—especially for disadvantaged and hard-to-reach segments of the population—and on regional development, which was most often understood in terms of community building. These policies should specify what is needed to reach out to target groups, address their needs in programme planning, teaching, and learner support (e.g. andragogical principles or criteria for inclusive spaces), and what is needed to contribute to regional development (e.g. participation, vocational and digital skills). Overarching goals that should be envisaged include responsiveness to learner and community needs, flexibility, and accessibility of provision. Collaboration among regional and local actors (e.g. integrating existing provision or organisations) and effective public communication (e.g. marketing) are two recurring areas at the level of organisational policy through which these overarching goals could be achieved.

In addition, AEduHUBs could connect with existing funding schemes or programmes. European funding schemes were mentioned as important sources, as were national, regional, or even municipal funding schemes. When connected to national adult education programmes (e.g. Slovenia) or to national employment programmes (e.g. Italy), AEduHUBs could benefit not only from the resources available through these programmes but also from the value they have within the adult education community (e.g. accreditation) or the labour market (e.g. qualifications). It was also considered important that policies support the establishment of coordination structures or websites through stable funding, which serves to maintain the good quality of AEduHUB services.

Preconditions concerning infrastructure

- What infrastructure would be needed to establish and operate an adult education hub?

When it comes to infrastructural preconditions, the majority of interviewees stated that an AEduHUB should encompass both a physical space for group and individual work, and a digital infrastructure (e.g. a learning platform) where information and materials are shared and where hybrid and distance learning opportunities are provided. Two interviewees considered an AEduHUB exclusively as a virtual platform and therefore only required a digital infrastructure.

As a physical space, an AEduHUB could be completely new, but to avoid creating additional structures, it should preferably build on or integrate already existing (public) spaces such as libraries, cultural centres, adult education centres, community centres, schools, or existing rooms owned by the municipality. It was also envisaged that an AEduHUB should not be limited to one municipality, but open to people from the entire regional area.

Important assets of physical AEduHUBs could include: a central location accessible by public transport, childcare facilities, full accessibility of all areas for people with disabilities, a welcoming area (e.g. reception, canteen), specialized technical spaces (e.g. computer labs or equipment in VET workshops), and accessible learning spaces in a more general sense (e.g. flexible classrooms and quiet study areas).

Preconditions concerning the expertise of actors

- What expertise would be needed to establish or operate an adult education hub?

Concerning the expertise needed for establishing and running an AEduHUB, interviewees considered that operating such a hub requires a blend of educational leadership, engagement with the local ecosystem, and operational management expertise. Specifically, the required areas of expertise include: strategic and educational leadership, operational and project management, curriculum development, teaching and learning support, community outreach, and marketing.

Interviewees strongly recommended cooperation between adult education professionals, counsellors, existing partners in the region, NGOs, as well as existing community spaces and local institutions. Staff working at an AEduHUB would need networking capacities, management abilities, marketing skills, and high-level digital competencies. Additionally, qualifications in adult education training, project management, and EU programme management would be useful. Since AEduHUB staff would work at the interface of regional systems and various stakeholders, they should be effective networkers and mediators.

Stakeholder for AEduHUBs

- Who could be the stakeholders, the supporting or cooperating partners of an adult education hub in your region, municipality or community?

According to the interviewees, establishing AEduHUBs with stakeholders in mind requires an ecosystem approach. Such an ecosystem would include statutory and strategic partners, community and voluntary partners, education and training partners, private sector and local economy partners, as well as specific service partners. Numerous stakeholders at the local and regional levels could be involved, including local authorities, educational institutions, employment and social services, businesses, chambers of commerce, NGOs, and cultural and public institutions. The private and voluntary sectors, professional associations, and voluntary organisations should also be included.

Overall, the focus is on cooperation between different sectors of society, particularly with a view to supporting education, integration, socially disadvantaged groups, and community building.

Obstacles for implementing AEduHUBs

- What obstacles can you imagine when establishing and operating an adult education hub in your region, municipality or community?

The main problems identified were a lack of clear responsibilities within an AEduHUB and a lack of political priority, which is needed as essential backing for the implementation of an AEduHUB. Further challenges include funding, staffing (e.g. finding qualified professionals), participant numbers, bureaucracy, and infrastructure (e.g. public transport, childcare). Additional barriers mentioned were stereotypes, language issues, and a lack of cooperation among those involved in the AEduHUB.

The country's vast geographical expanse is also expected to make implementation difficult. While online provision can help address some of these challenges, physical venues will remain important for fostering a sense of community among learners.

Learners' perspectives on AEdUHUBs

Expectations

- What do you expect from a hub, a physical or digital infrastructure that provides information, guidance and courses for adults in your region, municipality or community?

An AEdUHUB as a physical space should be bright, modern, easily accessible, and welcoming. It is important to foster an open, supportive atmosphere and to provide opportunities for both individual learning and interaction.

The programmes should be practical and flexible, offering online, hybrid, and in-person options, and should be tailored to the interests of adults. Good accessibility by public transport and opening hours in the afternoon or outside normal working hours are considered important. The website should be clear and easy to understand, containing all key information (courses, dates, prices, venues, procedures). At the same time, suitable solutions are needed for individual challenges, such as balancing family life, time constraints, or technical access. Practical tools to support learners, digital and inclusive skills, the promotion of collaboration and problem-solving, and good communication skills are essential. Equally important are well-structured further training programmes, support with curriculum development, and solid subject-specific preparation.

A professional in adult education should be subject-competent, empathetic, and well-prepared. Clear and respectful communication, active listening, cultural sensitivity, and a learner-centred approach are important. In addition, practical knowledge, digital skills, soft skills, and the ability to foster motivation, collaboration, and professional networking play a central role.

Reasons for participation in AEdUHUBs

- What are the most important reasons for to use an information service, a guidance service or participate in a course at an adult education hub?

The main reasons for participating in adult education offerings are the acquisition of knowledge, personal development, and career guidance. Motivation primarily stems from interesting topics, personalised advice, interaction with others, and high-quality learning opportunities. The main challenges to participation include a lack of time, balancing work and family life, unclear or ambiguous information, and a lack of flexibility or support from providers and professionals.

Roles of AEdUHUBs actors

Roles of decision makers

- What could be the role of a decision maker like you in establishing and operating an adult education hub?

The decision makers who were asked about their possible role in establishing and running an AEduHUB emphasized several forms of support: they could offer bureaucratic backing, networking and stakeholder coordination, co-financing, promotion of services, strategic support, and the integration of AEduHUBs into development strategies. Some considered contributing their regional expertise to promote adult education through networking and communication with regional or local boards, institutions, and companies, all of which they regard as fundamental to an AEduHUB.

It was also mentioned that decision makers would listen and respond to clear and understandable requests for support, initially funding actions without infrastructure, and then providing further support if the work of the AEduHUB was evaluated positively.

Roles of providers

- What could be the role of an adult education provider in establishing and operating an adult education hub?
- How would you ensure the accessibility and inclusivity of an adult education hub?

The interviewees responded that, in their opinion, the first step should be for all partners involved in an AEduHUB to allocate their responsibilities among themselves in a reasonable way. They argued that integrating different actors is more important than establishing an isolated HUB; therefore, synergies within the existing regional system of education and social services should be utilized. The focus must be on learners' needs, learning from the experience of successful regional systems or good practice examples, and from similar projects that already operate successfully.

At the service level, providers should offer flexible and needs-based learning opportunities. The providers' role consequently extends to the design and delivery of programmes in response to learner needs, as well as the facilitation of workshops and learning activities. It is important, in this respect, to allow for co-creation when connecting with different stakeholders.

Regarding services, the role of the provider is seen in designing offerings that are easily accessible and inclusive (in terms of location, cost, and social inclusion). It is also important to have learning methods tailored to individuals with different backgrounds (e.g. low educational attainment, learning or communication difficulties). Furthermore, networks, an easily accessible location, and a variety of communication channels (e.g. newspapers, word of mouth) play a role. Programmes should also be specifically tailored to particular target groups.

Role of professionals

- What could be the role of an adult education professional (e.g. teacher, tutor, counsellor) in establishing and operating an adult education hub?
- Which tools, instruments could professionals use to identify and document the prior learning, the needs, the interests and ambitions of learners?

When asked about their role, the professionals expressed that they see themselves as facilitators, connecting learners with resources and opportunities. They design learning pathways, promote lifelong learning and inclusion, plan programmes, and apply innovative methods. Additionally, they coordinate activities, ensure

accessibility, network with local stakeholders, and monitor the quality of learning and learners' progress. All of this is accomplished by drawing on their own expertise and skill sets as valuable resources.

Regarding the process of identifying learners' needs, the professionals reported that they use surveys, online questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, learning portfolios, self-assessments, digital tools for skills mapping and competence validation, as well as other data collection tools. These data are essential for developing and structuring courses and classes. Cooperation with other local organisations is also helpful in this respect. Most importantly, however, professionals rely on their own experience and dialogical interaction to gain a sense of what learners need and how to address their prior learning and skills gaps.

Conclusions

To finalise this report, we must address the question: What conclusions can we draw for the Methodological Concept and the Training Programme?

1. **Identification of Relevant Topics for the Training Programme:** The results provide numerous indications regarding which topics should be included in the Training Programme. The main topics align with the primary categories identified through the deductive-inductive qualitative content analysis: The design and preconditions of AEduHUBs, learners' perspectives, and the roles of various actors.
2. **Normative and Strategic Orientations of AEduHUBs:** The main category concerning the design of AEduHUBs forms the basis for discussing both the normative and strategic orientations of AEduHUBs. It is important for participants to learn about these orientations, as this was specifically highlighted by interviewees when discussing the general preconditions for AEduHUBs.
3. **Reflection on Learners' Perspectives and Actor Roles:** Comparing and discussing the results related to learners' perspectives and the roles of AEduHUBs can serve as a valuable opportunity for participants to reflect on their own approaches. This reflective process would be a useful component of the training, complementing both thematic input phases and periods of self-directed learning.

In Table 3, we have juxtaposed the main topics of the five modules of the Training Programme with the categories derived from the field research, highlighting the topics to be included in the Methodological Concept.

Table 7. Modules, main competence areas and potential contents

Module	Main competence areas	Contents
Skills identification, validation, micro-credentials	Skills assessment	
Identifying skills gaps, learning needs, and education pathways	Programme planning	Learners' perspectives Understanding of AE
Establishing rural adult education hubs	Management	AEduHUBs design AEduHUBs preconditions Learners' perspectives Roles of AEduHUBs actors
Outreach and motivation strategies, low-threshold access	Public relations	Understanding of AE Addresses of AEduHUBs

Designing tailored learning based on target group needs	Programme planning	Learners' perspectives Services provided by AEduHUs Understanding of AE
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Overall, the findings from the field research directly inform both the content and structure of the Training Programme and the Methodological Concept. By aligning the modules with the identified categories, the programme ensures relevance, practical applicability, and responsiveness to the needs of both learners and stakeholders.

The table shows that the interview results are very helpful, as they fit well into the modular structure of the Training Programme. Only Module 1—skills identification, validation, and micro-credentials—appears to be too specific to be covered well by the interviews. Therefore, for this module, we will rely primarily on literature when designing the syllabus. For all other modules, we will combine empirical insights from the field research with findings from the literature.

Training programme structure

General information

Target group of the course

The target group of this course are adult education professionals, including those who identify as:

- teachers, educators, trainers, coaches or facilitators;
- tutors, mentors, advisors or counsellors;
- librarians, community developers or cultural workers;
- programme planners, coordinators and managers of organisations and networks.

in the areas of basic education, vocational education, higher education, popular education, lifelong learning; educational, vocational and lifelong guidance; community education, community and regional development as well as active labour market policy.

There are no entry requirements. The course is open to people with experience in one of the abovementioned roles and for those without much experience, who want to become active in one of these roles or fields of practice, be it with an employment contract in public or private organisation or in any form of voluntary work.

Purpose of the course

The purpose of the course is to provide adult education professionals with basic terminology, concepts, models and practical instruments in the four training areas of competence assessment, needs assessment, programme planning, and public relations, as well as the knowledge domains of five modules. Moreover, adult education professionals are guided and supported in the reflection of prior experiences as well as the experimentation with practical instruments. The following are the knowledge domains of the five modules:

- Skills identification, validation, micro-credentials
- Identification of skill gaps, learning needs and education pathways
- Establishment of rural adult education hubs
- Outreach and motivation strategies, and low-threshold access
- Design of tailored learning based on target group needs

After participating in the course, the adult education professionals should be able to engage in a reflective manner in constructing, establishing and maintaining an adult education hub as well as in designing, planning and coordinating adult education activities. They should also be able to identify information and sources, through which they can further develop their knowledge, skills and professional values by the means of self-organised learning activities. For people with experience, the course might serve to reactivate prior knowledge and skills, or to access new fields of professional practice, in which they can engage in self-organised learning activities after the end of the course. For people with no or very little experience, the course might be an opportunity to get familiar with the work in adult education and gain interest in further engaging in self-organised professional development.

Specific information

Overview of the course structure

The course altogether encompasses 40 learning hours. 20 learning hours have to be completed in an in-person workshop and 20 learning hours have to be completed via self-directed learning with online materials. For each of the five modules, there are four hours of workshop and four hours of self-directed learning. Each module consists of three main topics that will be covered fully through online materials or will be covered through a blended-learning approach.

Module	Knowledge domain	Total	Workshop	Online
1	Skills identification, validation, micro-credentials	8	4	4
2	Identification of skill gaps, learning needs, education pathways	8	4	4
3	Establishment of rural adult education hubs	8	4	4
4	Outreach and motivation strategies, low-threshold access	8	4	4
5	Design of tailored learning based on target group needs	8	4	4

Teaching and learning formats

In the workshops, participants will discuss terminology, concepts, models and practical instruments in groups, reflect on their own professional experience and experiment with some of the practical instruments when working on short assignments.

The self-directed learning will be structured and facilitated with course materials, including Power Point Presentations, thematic hand-outs, short information videos, quizzes and academic texts for further reading. All course materials for the self-directed learning hours and for further learning will be provided on a moodle platform.

Module 1: Skills identification, validation, recognition, micro-credentials

Main training area: Skills assessment

Main topics to be covered

- Learning contexts and types of knowledge and skills
- Validation and recognition basics: Contexts, types, and methods
- Micro-credentials basics: Purpose, contexts, and characteristics

Alongside formally acquired knowledge, skills and learning experiences gained in non-formal and informal contexts such as work, voluntary work, family life or leisure activities are of great importance. The validation and recognition of learning outcomes (VNFIL) makes these experiences visible and can confer formal value upon them. This can take place both summatively, to compare learning outcomes with curricular requirements and recognise them formally, and formatively, to record a wide range of learning outcomes and support learners in independently shaping their future educational pathways. An ideal validation process encompasses the areas of orientation, validation and quality management.

Learning outcomes

- Participants are able to describe different learning contexts and types of knowledge and skills by using conceptual terminology and examples from their own practice.
- Participants are able to explain the purpose, the design and roles of actors within different types of validation and recognition measures.
- Participants are able to discuss the main advantages and disadvantages of micro-credentials from the standpoint of learners and curriculum-design.

Module 2: Skill gaps, learning needs, adult education pathways

Main training area: Programme planning

Main topics to be covered

- Societal developments, learners' perspectives and their role in adult education
- Needs-analysis in the political economy model of programme planning
- Methods of needs-analysis and programme planning

Needs analysis in adult education can be viewed from three different perspectives: market-oriented, state-oriented and civil society-oriented. The market-oriented perspective focuses primarily on the demands of the labour market and existing skills gaps. The state-oriented perspective is guided by government education objectives and societal needs, whilst the civil society perspective focuses in particular on marginalised groups and the promotion of inclusion, emancipation, social justice and democratic participation.

Learning outcomes

- Participants are able to reflect on the interplay and interdependencies between societal demands, learners' demands and adult education provision.
- Participants are able to explain the differences between a market-, a state-, and a civil society-oriented approach to programme planning.
- Participants are able to design and use simple measures for the identification of skill gaps and development potentials of participants.

Module 3: Establishing rural adult education hubs

Main training area: Management

Main topics to be covered

- Components of regional adult education ecosystems
- Approaches to the establishment of AEduHUBs
- AEduHUBs preconditions, design and the roles of actors

The establishment of an AEduHUB requires a clear vision, a suitable political and financial framework, and close collaboration between regional stakeholders. Existing physical and digital infrastructure should be integrated as far as possible and supplemented by accessible, flexible and needs-based learning

opportunities. Specialist staff with expertise in adult education, management, digitalisation, networking and public relations are essential for the organisation's operation.

Learning outcomes

- Participants are able to identify and designate the horizontal and vertical components of a regional adult education ecosystem.
- Participants are able to define the preconditions and roles of actors in their regional AEduHUB and design a core structure of that AEduHUB.
- Participants are able to formulate the basic components of a normative statement and a strategic plan to establish a regional AEduHUB.

Module 4: Outreach, motivation, low-threshold entry points

Main training area: Public relations

Main topics to be covered

- Addressees, target groups, and participants in adult education
- Understanding the field of adult education
- Outreach strategies: personal, non-personal marketing

AEduHUBs can be aimed either at the entire adult population or specifically at certain groups identified on the basis of regional data and social characteristics. Of particular relevance are disadvantaged or hard-to-reach groups such as the unemployed, the low-skilled, migrants, older people and young adults. Interesting and high-quality programmes, personalised guidance and social interaction are crucial for participation, whilst a lack of time, unclear information and a lack of flexibility represent significant barriers to participation.

Learning outcomes

- Participants are able to explain differences between and define addressees, target groups and participants in their regions.
- Participants are able to identify main types and institutions of adult education and key components of national adult education governance.
- Participants are able to design personal, non-personal, and marketing strategies to reach out to the adult population in their region or municipality.

Module 5: Designing tailored learning based on target group needs

Main training area: Programme planning

Main topics to be covered

- Technical, socio-political, and ethical dimensions of programme planning
- Services to support the participation, learning and development of adults
- Course design and evaluation basic strategies and methods

The interviews show that structured learning programmes, coordination and collaboration, counselling and mentoring, and the promotion of adult education are of particular importance to AEduHUBs. Other key services include information on courses, opportunities for self-directed learning, as well as needs assessments and labour market research. To deliver these services, staff require skills in needs assessment, programme planning, adult education guidance, collaboration, communication and the development of low-threshold access to adult education.

Learning outcomes

- Participants are able to discuss the differences and functions of a technical, a socio-political and an ethical approach to programme planning.
- Participants are able to identify a list of realistic services for their AEduHUB and describe their personal role in implementing these services.
- Participants are able to design and evaluate a course for a specific group of adult learners in their region, municipality or community.

Annexes

Annex 1. Word cloud concerning the definition of AEduHUBS



Annex 2. Clustering of the word cloud concerning the definition of AEduHUBS

Definitory dimension		
Overall understanding - Diverse communities - Community centered - Networks - Connection	Manifestation - Social point - Social sharing center - Exchange place	Implementation - Coordinating center - One stop shop - Responsibility
Normative dimension		
Values - Openness - Diversity - Welcoming	Objectives - Inclusiveness - Broad accessibility - Holistic - Intergenerational	
Strategic dimension		
Interactive infrastructure - Blended approach - Interactive spaces - Informality (Feeling relaxed)	General services - Open doors - Opening hours - Flexible timetable - Transparency - Reliable information - Childcare - Food accessibility	Educational services - Different opportunities - Guidance - Diverse contents - Practical and adaptable - Human support - Peer support - Comprehensive expertise
Outcome dimension		
Individual level - Lifelong learning - Well-being - Personal development - Possibility development	Collective level - Impact - Progress	

Annex 3. Questionnaire for the desk research

Demographic and Socio-Cultural Context of Adult Education in the Regions

- a) *What do we need to know about the demographic and socio-cultural situation in your region, and why is this important for adult education?*
- b) *Which is the most important target group for adult education in your region, and why is it important to address this group?*

Structure and Governance of Adult Education in the Regions

- a) *What is the most relevant or most in-demand type of adult education in your region, and why is it relevant or in demand?*
- b) *Who are the key actors for adult education in your region (e.g. governments, employment agencies, municipalities), and why are they important?*
 - b1) *What role do the national government, the regional government, local authorities, and employment agencies play?*
- c) *What role do institutional actors (e.g., Chamber of Labour, Chamber of Commerce) or civil society actors (e.g., local communities, family groups) play?*
- d) *What role do private sector companies and labour market requirements play?*
- e) *What is working well, and what are the biggest challenges for adult education providers in your region, and why is it working well or why is it challenging?*

Relevant Policy Materials for Adult Education in the Regions

- a) *Who is the author, what type of material is it, and why are this author and the type of material important for adult education in your region?*
- b) *What is the topic of the document, and why is it important for adult education in your region?*
- c) *What are the main proposals, regulations, or guidelines contained in the material, and why are they significant for adult education in your region?*

Annex 4. Questionnaire for the field research

Before the interview Interviewer briefly explains the topic and the main goals of the AEduHUBs project, explains the data protection and the letter of consent, and clarifies all open questions. Please use the one-page project summary. Have the data protection and letter of consent printed twice and have it signed twice. Keep one version and give the second version to the interviewee.	
Main questions To start the communication with a narrative focus Specific questions	Key words To keep the communication running

To obtain detailed answers for the conceptual model and the training programme	
1) Prior experience Please tell us a little bit about yourself, the institution or organisation you work for, and your experience with regard to adult education. • What do you understand by adult education? • What characterises adult education in your understanding? • Are you familiar with adult education offers in your region, municipality or community?	
2) Definition What you associate with the idea of an adult education hub. What comes to your mind when you think about an adult education hub? • What could be the purpose of an adult education hub? • What could be the service provided by an adult education hub? • What could be short-, mid- and long-term results of an adult education hub?	Physical/digital, networks, connection, learning opportunities, exchange, services, responsibility
3) Addressees Which group of people would be in greatest need of an adult education hub in your region, municipality or community? Why would they need an adult education hub?	e.g. unemployed persons, job seekers, older persons, persons seeking a career change, migrants, students in higher education, families/parents, everybody
4) Preconditions What would be general preconditions for establishing and operating an adult education hub in your region, municipality or community? • What policies would support the establishment of an adult education hub? Do you have any existing policy in mind? • What infrastructure would be needed to establish and operate an adult education hub? Do you have any existing infrastructure in mind?	Clear objectives, knowledge of target groups, qualified professionals, infrastructure and premises, financial resources, networks and partnerships, flexibility and adaptability, public relations

• What expertise would be needed to establish or operate an adult education hub? Do you have an organisation or a person in mind?	
5) Stakeholder Who could be the stakeholders, the supporting or cooperating partners of an adult education hub in your region, municipality or community?	Potential participants, political decision makers, public institutions, educational institutions, social and non-profit organisations, qualified professionals, volunteers and volunteer groups, community organisations, professional associations, community representatives, research institutions
6) Obstacles What obstacles can you imagine when establishing and operating an adult education hub in your region, municipality or community?	Financial challenges, bureaucratic hurdles, qualified professionals, infrastructure problems, equipment, demand, long-term sustainability, social and cultural barriers, competitive pressure
7) Decision makers What could be the role of a decision maker like you in establishing and operating an adult education hub? • What would motivate you to support an adult education hub? • How would you support an adult education hub? • What could be the benefit of an adult education hub for your region, municipality, institution, or community?	Knowledge of laws and strategies, bureaucratic support, provision of financial resources, networking and cooperation, promotion of innovation
8) Providers What could be the role of an adult education provider like you in establishing and operating an adult education hub? • What is the most important experience or learning from your work that you could contribute to an adult education hub? • Do you have any good-practice examples of adult education in your region, municipality or community that you would like to share? • How would you ensure the accessibility and inclusivity of an adult education hub?	Programme design and development, quality management, human resources management, premises and equipment, public relations, monitoring and evaluation

• How would you address and reach-out to learners and motivate them to frequent the adult education hub? • How open would you be to changes in your institutional or organisational programme if the learners' needs would require it?	
9) Professionals What could be the role of an adult education professional like you (e.g. a teacher, tutor or counsellor) in establishing and operating an adult education hub? • What could be the tasks and responsibilities of adult education professionals in establishing and operating an adult education hub? • How important are voluntary work and/or regular remuneration of professionals working in adult education hubs? What would you expect or demand from a training programme for professionals involved in adult education hubs? • What knowledge, skills, and attitudes would adult education professionals need to work in an adult education hub? • Which tools, instruments could professionals use to identify and document the needs, the barriers, the social situation of target groups, communities or labour markets? • Which tools, instruments could professionals use to identify and document the prior learning, the needs, the interests and ambitions of learners? • What would encourage or motivate you to participate in peer-learning or continuous professional development offers?	Needs analysis and programme design, information sharing and knowledge transfer, support and advice for learners, implementation of innovative teaching methods Needs analysis and programme design, information sharing and knowledge transfer, support and advice for learners, implementation of innovative teaching methods
10) Final outlook If you could choose one thing an adult education hub should definitely provide or achieve, what would that be?	

• Would you like to ask anything else or add anything?	
Pool of additional questions to stimulate communication: • Do you have a specific example of this? • Can you clarify or illustrate this (using an example)? • What else comes to your mind or occurs to you in this regard? • How do you see it? • Would you like to add anything else? • What prompted you to do this? After the interview Make sure you have completed the data in the data protection sheet and the interviewee has signed the letter of consent.	

Before the interview Interviewer briefly explains the topic and the main goals of the AEduHUBs project, explains the data protection and the letter of consent, and clarifies all open questions. Please use the one-page project summary. Have the data protection and letter of consent printed twice and have it signed twice. Keep one version and give the second version to the interviewee.	
Main questions To start the communication with a narrative focus Specific questions To obtain detailed answers for the conceptual model and the training programme	Key words To keep the communication running
1) Prior experience Please tell us a little bit about yourself, your work experience/professional background, and your experience with regard to adult education. • What do you understand by adult education? What characterises adult education in your understanding? • Are you familiar with adult education in your region, municipality or community? • Where have you found information about adult education in your region, municipality or community?	

• Which type or form of adult education have you participated in? • How would you describe your overall experience in adult education?	
2) Definition Imagine you find a flyer announcing the opening of a so-called adult education hub in your region, municipality or community, what comes to your mind? What you associate with the idea of an adult education hub.	Physical/digital, networks, connection, learning opportunities, exchange, services, responsibility
3) Reasons for participation Please tell us what the most important reasons for you would be to use an information service, a guidance service or participate in a course at an adult education hub? • What would motivate you to use an adult education service? • What would stop you from using an adult education hub? • How attractive is it to you to have your qualifications, knowledge, skills, demands and interests be documented and confirmed? • How attractive is it to you to earn awards, certificates or qualifications for your learning efforts?	Access to knowledge and resources, acquisition of skills and knowledge, professional qualifications, personal development, integration support, networking and exchange opportunities, qualified professionals, counselling
4) Expectations What do you expect from a hub, a physical or digital infrastructure that provides information, guidance and courses for adults in your region, municipality or community? • What do you think a place for adult education should be like? • What type, form or contents of the services would be of interest to you? • What role does public transportation access play in your participation? • What opening hours would you consider appropriate for an adult education hub?	Access to information and knowledge, relevant and practical content, diverse course offerings, flexibility in course design, qualified and dedicated professionals, interactive and engaging learning methods, networking and exchange opportunities, support, counselling, e-learning, digital learning platforms

• What information or service would you want to get from a website or any other digital platform?	
5) Professionals What expertise, competences or behaviours do you expect from an ideal counsellor, teacher, or tutor in an adult education? How should this person interact with you?	Pedagogical and didactic competence, subject-specific competence, technological competence, empathy and understanding, communication skills, commitment and passion, professionalism, structure and clarity, reflective ability, flexibility and adaptability, cultural sensitivity, individual support
6) Final outlook If you could choose one thing an adult education hub should definitely provide or achieve, what would that be? • Would you like to ask anything else or add anything?	
Pool of additional questions to stimulate communication: • Do you have a specific example of this? • Can you clarify or illustrate this (using an example)? • What else comes to your mind or occurs to you in this regard? • How do you see it? • Would you like to add anything else? • What prompted you to do this? After the interview Make sure you have completed the data in the data protection sheet and the interviewee has signed the letter of consent.	