



United Nations  
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# Recommendation on **Adult Learning and Education**

2015

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# Foreword

The Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education was adopted at the 38th Session of the UNESCO General Conference in November 2015. The Recommendation supports the Education 2030 Framework for Action, reflects global trends, and will guide the transformation and expansion of equitable learning opportunities for youth and adults.

An update of the 1976 Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education was proposed by UNESCO's International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) in 1997 and 2009. The 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (ALE) supersedes the 1976 Recommendation and is therefore the most up-to-date and comprehensive tool for ALE decision-makers, researchers, practitioners from governmental and civil society organizations, and other stakeholders around the globe. Taking into account the rapidly changing world in which we live, the Recommendation sets out guiding principles for promoting and developing ALE in UNESCO's Member States.

The 2015 Recommendation takes a comprehensive and systematic approach to ALE, defining three key domains of learning and skills: literacy and basic skills; continuing education and vocational skills; as well as liberal, popular and community education and citizenship skills. It also describes five transversal areas of action: policy; governance; financing; participation, inclusion and equity; and quality. These areas of action were already introduced to the international community in the Belém Framework for Action, adopted at CONFINTEA in 2009 as a means of guiding Member States in improving ALE. This integrative and consistent approach to ALE will help Member States to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (Sustainable Development Goal 4). Member States should now implement the Recommendation and further strengthen international cooperation in ALE. The CONFINTEA process, which involves regular reporting in the form of the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE), will be instrumental in monitoring activities undertaken by Member States to implement the Recommendation.

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), in consultation with a broad range of stakeholders from Member States, has played a pivotal role in drafting the Recommendation. The drafting was carried out in tandem with the revision of UNESCO's Recommendation Concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to ensure that the two normative instruments are mutually reinforcing.

In line with its mandate, UIL will continue to promote lifelong learning for all, focusing on lifelong learning policies and strategies, literacy and basic skills, and adult learning and

education. The 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education can potentially play an important role in fulfilling this mandate and in improving learning conditions for youth and adults in UNESCO's Member States.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Qian Tang', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Qian Tang**

Assistant Director-General for Education

# Recommendation on **Adult Learning and Education**

## **Preamble**

The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), meeting in Paris from 3 to 18 November 2015, at its 38th session

**Recalling** the principles set forth in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), Article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), Articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and the principles contained in the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960),

**Reaffirming** that in the framework of lifelong learning, literacy constitutes an indispensable foundation and adult learning and education an integral part. Literacy and adult learning and education contribute to the realization of the right to education that enables adults to exercise other economic, political, social and cultural rights, and which should meet the key criteria of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability in conformity with General Comment No. 13 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (21st session) referring to Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,

**Acknowledging** that we live in a rapidly changing world, in which governments and citizens face simultaneous challenges which prompt us to review the conditions for realizing the right to education for all adults,

**Reiterating** the significant role of adult learning and education in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit (New York, September 2015), and **noting** the commitment of the international community to the promotion of social development, sustained and inclusive economic growth, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty and hunger,

**In the light of** the Incheon Declaration “Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all” and the Education 2030 Framework for Action,

**Acknowledging** both the achievements made in the development of adult learning and education since 1976, as discussed during the 1985, 1997 and 2009 International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFITEA IV, V and VI) and at the Education for All (EFA) conferences (World Conference on EFA, Jomtien 1990 and World Education Forum, Dakar 2000), and the need to further strengthen adult learning and education, as documented in the 2009 and 2013 Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE),

**Referring** to the International Standard Classification of Education 2011,

**Underlining** the relevance of improving technical and vocational education and training as expressed in the UNESCO Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training (2015), which contains specific provisions for continuing training and professional development,

**Having decided** by means of 37 C/Resolution 16 that the 1976 Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education should be revised to reflect contemporary educational, cultural, political, social and economic challenges, as set out in the Hamburg Declaration and the Belém Framework for Action, and to give renewed momentum to adult education,

**Considering** that this Recommendation sets out general principles, goals and guidelines that each Member State should apply according to its socio-economic context, governing

structures and available resources, with a view to enhancing the status of adult learning and education at the national, regional and international levels,

**Having examined** document 38 C/31 and the draft Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education annexed thereto,

1. Adopts the present Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education, which supersedes the 1976 Recommendation, on this thirteenth day of November 2015;
2. Recommends that Member States apply the following provisions by taking appropriate steps, including whatever legislative or other steps may be required, in conformity with the constitutional practice and governing structures of each State, to give effect within their territories to the principles of this Recommendation;
3. Also recommends that Member States bring this Recommendation to the attention of the authorities and bodies responsible for adult learning and education and also of other stakeholders concerned with adult learning and education;
4. Further recommends that Member States report to it, at such dates and in such manner as shall be determined by it, on the action taken by them in pursuance of this Recommendation.

## I. DEFINITION AND SCOPE

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1. Adult learning and education is a core component of lifelong learning. It comprises all forms of education and learning that aim to ensure that all adults participate in their societies and the world of work. It denotes the entire body of learning processes, formal, non-formal and informal, whereby those regarded as adults by the society in which they live, develop and enrich their capabilities for living and working, both in their own interests and those of their communities, organizations and societies. Adult learning and education involves sustained activities and processes of acquiring, recognizing, exchanging, and adapting capabilities. Given that the boundaries of youth and adulthood are shifting in most cultures, in this text the term

“adult” denotes all those who engage in adult learning and education, even if they have not reached the legal age of maturity.

2. Adult learning and education constitutes a major building block of a learning society, and for the creation of learning communities, cities and regions as they foster a culture of learning throughout life and revitalize learning in families, communities and other learning spaces, and in the workplace.
3. The types of adult learning and education activities vary widely. Adult learning and education includes many learning opportunities for equipping adults with literacy and basic skills; for continuing training and professional development, and for active citizenship, through what is variously known as community, popular or liberal education. Adult learning and education provides a variety of learning pathways and flexible learning opportunities, including second chance programmes to make up for lack of initial schooling, including for people who have never been to school, early school leavers and drop outs.
4. Literacy is a key component of adult learning and education. It involves a continuum of learning and proficiency levels which allows citizens to engage in lifelong learning and participate fully in community, workplace and wider society. It includes the ability to read and write, to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials, as well as the ability to solve problems in an increasingly technological and information-rich environment. Literacy is an essential means of building people’s knowledge, skills and competencies to cope with the evolving challenges and complexities of life, culture, economy and society.
5. Continuing training and professional development is a fundamental element in a continuum of learning that equips adults with the knowledge, skills and competencies to fully engage in rapidly-changing societal and working environments. The UNESCO Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training (2015) contains relevant provisions in this area.
6. Adult learning and education also includes education and learning opportunities for active citizenship, variously known as community, popular or liberal education. It empowers people to actively engage with social issues such as poverty, gender, intergenerational solidarity, social mobility, justice, equity, exclusion, violence, unemployment, environmental protection and climate change. It also helps people to lead a decent life, in terms of health and well-being, culture, spirituality and in all other ways that contribute to personal development and dignity.
7. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are seen as holding great potential for improving access by adults to a variety of learning opportunities and promoting equity and inclusion. They offer various innovative possibilities for realizing lifelong learning, reducing the dependence on traditional formal structures of education and permitting individualized learning. Through mobile devices, electronic networking, social media and on- line courses, adult learners can have access to opportunities to learn anytime and anywhere. Information and communication technologies have also considerable capacity for facilitating access to education for people with disabilities permitting their fuller integration into society, as well as for other marginalized or disadvantaged groups.



## II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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8. The aim of adult learning and education is to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realize their rights and take control of their destinies. It promotes personal and professional development, thereby supporting more active engagement by adults with their societies, communities and environments. It fosters sustainable and inclusive economic growth and decent work prospects for individuals. It is therefore a crucial tool in alleviating poverty, improving health and well-being and contributing to sustainable learning societies.
9. The objectives of adult learning and education are (a) to develop the capacity of individuals to think critically and to act with autonomy and a sense of responsibility; (b) to reinforce the capacity to deal with and shape the developments taking place in the economy and the world of work; (c) to contribute to the creation of a learning society where every individual has an opportunity to learn and fully participate in sustainable development processes and to enhance solidarity among people and communities; (d) to promote peaceful coexistence and human rights; (e) to foster resilience in young and older adults; (f) to enhance awareness for the protection of the environment.

## III. AREAS OF ACTION

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10. This Recommendation specifically addresses the following areas from the Belém Framework for Action adopted by the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI): policy, governance, financing, participation, inclusion and equity, and quality.

### **Policy**

11. Member States, according to their specific conditions, governing structures and constitutional provisions, should develop comprehensive, inclusive and integrated policies for adult learning and education in its various forms.
  - (a) Member States should develop comprehensive policies that address learning in a wide range of spheres, including the economic, political, social, cultural, technological and environmental.
  - (b) Member States should develop inclusive policies that address the learning needs of all adults by providing equitable access to learning opportunities, and differentiated strategies without discrimination on any grounds.
  - (c) Member States should develop integrated policies using interdisciplinary and intersectoral knowledge and expertise, encompassing education and training policies and related policy areas, such as economic development, human resource development, labour, health, environment, justice, agriculture and culture.
12. To develop adult learning and education policies, Member States should consider:

- (a) strengthening or creating inter-ministerial forums to articulate across sectors the roles of adult learning and education in the lifelong learning spectrum, as well as its contributions to the development of societies;
- (b) involving all relevant stakeholders, including parliamentarians, public authorities, academia, civil society organizations, and the private sector as partners in policy development;
- (c) providing suitable structures and mechanisms for the development of adult learning and education policies, whilst ensuring that the policies developed are flexible enough to adapt to future needs, issues and challenges.

13. To nurture a favourable policy environment, Member States should consider:

- (a) raising awareness, through legislation, institutions and sustained political commitment, of adult learning and education as an essential component of the right to education and a key pillar in the education system;
- (b) taking measures to provide information, motivate learners and guide them towards relevant learning opportunities;
- (c) demonstrating, including through the collection, analysis and dissemination of effective policies and practices, the wider benefits of literacy, adult learning and education to society, such as social cohesion, health and well-being, community development, employment and environmental protection, as aspects of inclusive, equitable and sustainable development.

## **Governance**

14. According to their specific conditions, governing structures and constitutional provisions, Member States should consider enhancing the governance of adult learning and education, including through strengthening or creating cooperative structures and participatory processes, such as multi-stakeholder partnerships, at local, national, regional and international levels.

15. Member States should establish mechanisms and manage institutions and processes at the local, national, regional and global levels that are effective, transparent, accountable and democratic, and foster multi-stakeholder partnerships. Member States should consider:

- (a) ensuring suitable representation by and participation of relevant stakeholders in the development of policies and programmes in order to ensure democratic governance and responsiveness to the needs of all learners, in particular the most disadvantaged;
- (b) developing multi-stakeholder partnerships, contributing to offering an enabling environment for good governance, which should involve all relevant actors in adult learning and education from public authorities, civil society organizations and the private sector (such as ministries, local authorities, parliaments, learners' associations, the media, volunteer groups, research institutes and academia, private foundations, chambers of commerce and industry, trade unions, international and regional organizations) including those who organize teaching and learning processes and validate competencies at local, national, regional and international levels;

- (c) disseminating developments and achievements of wider interest, so that they can be used as benchmarks.
16. Member States should consider establishing mechanisms and processes at national and local levels that are flexible, responsive and decentralized. Rural and urban areas should have inclusive and sustainable strategies where every individual shall have opportunities to learn and fully participate in development processes.
17. Member States should consider developing learning cities, towns and villages, by:
- (a) mobilizing resources to promote inclusive learning;
  - (b) revitalizing learning in families and communities; (
  - (c) facilitating learning for and in the workplace;
  - (d) extending the use of modern learning technologies;
  - (e) enhancing quality and excellence in learning;
  - (f) fostering a culture of learning throughout life.

## **Financing**

18. Member States should mobilize and allocate sufficient financial resources to support enhanced and successful participation in adult learning and education, through appropriate mechanisms, including inter-ministerial coordination, partnerships and cost-sharing.
19. Governments have a fundamental role in budgeting and allocation according to each State's social priorities (education, health, food security, among others) and respecting the principle of shared responsibility between governments, the private sector and individuals. Member States should mobilize and allocate sufficient resources to adult education in accordance with national needs. The necessary measures should be taken to use the resources available in a sustainable, effective, efficient, democratic and accountable way.
20. All efforts should be made to put in place a strategy for mobilizing resources across all relevant government departments and from different stakeholders. Literacy, as the foundation for lifelong learning and a key condition for realizing the right to education, should be universally accessible and freely available. For the individual learner, lack of funds should not be an obstacle to participation in adult learning and education programmes. Member States should consider:
- (a) prioritizing investment in literacy and basic skills, and continuing adult learning and education;
  - (b) fostering inter-ministerial coordination between policy areas (e.g. economic development, human resource, labour, health, agriculture, and environment), which is essential in optimizing the use of resources (cost-effectiveness and cost-sharing) and maximizing learning outcomes;
  - (c) making the allocation and use of resources transparent to reflect the priorities that have been established according to research results on the current situation of adult education.

21. Member States, may consider offering co-financing and setting incentives to facilitate learning. For example, individual learning accounts (ILAs), subsidies (vouchers and allowances) and support for training leave for workers might be considered.

## **Participation, inclusion and equity**

22. Member States should consider, according to their specific conditions, governing structures and constitutional provisions, promoting participation, inclusion and equity so that no individual is excluded from adult learning and education and that quality learning opportunities are available to all women and men of diverse social, cultural, linguistic, economic, educational and other backgrounds.
23. To promote access and broader participation, Member States should consider, according to their specific conditions, governing structures and constitutional provisions, developing effective educational responses, especially to address accessibility, autonomy, equity and inclusion issues. Particular attention should be given to specific target groups, with a view to acknowledging their contribution to societal development while respecting cultural and other forms of diversity, including multilingualism, and ensure that further qualifications are not only validated but valued with regard to income and status. This implies:
- (a) establishing appropriate strategies to promote adults' access to and participation in learning activities and to enhance incentives for them to undertake such activities;
  - (b) tolerating no discrimination on any grounds, including age, gender, ethnicity, migrant status, language, religion, disability, illness, rurality, sexual identity or orientation, poverty, displacement, imprisonment, occupation or profession;
  - (c) devoting special attention and action to enhance access to quality learning for disadvantaged or vulnerable groups such as individuals with low levels of, or no, literacy and numeracy and schooling, vulnerable youth, migrant workers, unemployed workers, members of ethnic minorities, indigenous groups, individuals with disability, prisoners, the elderly, people affected by conflict or disasters, refugees, stateless or displaced persons;
  - (d) addressing learners' needs and aspirations with adult learning approaches which respect and reflect the diversity of learners' languages and heritage, including indigenous culture and values, create bridges between different groups and reinforce integrative capacities within communities;
  - (e) giving special attention to programmes or initiatives that promote gender equality;
  - (f) creating or strengthening appropriate institutional structures, like community learning centres, for delivering adult learning and education and encouraging adults to use these as hubs for individual learning as well as community development;
  - (g) developing high-quality information and guidance services, which facilitate access to participation, help improve the visibility of the gains resulting from adult learning, and ensure a better match between the demands of individuals and learning opportunities.

24. Member States should guarantee equitable access to adult learning and education, and promote broader and sustained participation by fostering a culture of learning throughout life and by minimizing barriers to participation.

## Quality

25. To ensure effective policy and programme implementation through periodical monitoring and evaluation of adult learning and education policies and programmes, Member States should consider, according to their specific conditions, governing structures and constitutional provisions:
- (a) establishing mechanisms and/or structures that utilize appropriate quality criteria and standards, subject to periodic review;
  - (b) taking appropriate measures to follow up on the results of the monitoring and evaluation;
  - (c) collecting and analysing disaggregated data in a timely, reliable, and valid manner and share effective and innovative practices in monitoring and evaluation.
26. To ensure quality in adult education and its potential for transformation in all relevant spheres, attention should be paid to the relevance, equity, effectiveness and efficiency of adult learning and education. To this end, Member States should consider, according to their specific conditions, governing structures and constitutional provisions:
- (a) aligning the provision of adult learning and education, through contextualized and learner-centred culturally and linguistically appropriate programmes, with the needs of all stakeholders, including those of the labour market;
  - (b) ensuring fair access to, and sustained participation and learning without discrimination in adult learning and education;
  - (c) assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of programmes by measuring the extent to which they achieve the desired objectives, including in relation to their outcomes.
27. Member States should promote, according to their specific conditions, governing structures and constitutional provisions, flexible and seamless learning pathways between formal and non-formal education and training, and build necessary capacities for policy and programme evaluation to that end.
28. Member States should foster an environment where quality adult learning and education is provided through measures such as:
- (a) developing appropriate content and modes of delivery, preferably using mother-tongue as the language of instruction, and adopting learner-centred pedagogy, supported by information and communication technology (ICT) and open educational resources;
  - (b) providing decent infrastructure, including safe learning spaces;
  - (c) establishing tools and mechanisms and building necessary capacities for monitoring and evaluation in the field of adult learning and education, taking into account the depth and breadth of participation, learning processes, outcomes and impact measures;

- (d) developing suitable literacy measurement tools;
- (e) establishing quality assurance mechanisms and programme monitoring and evaluation as integral components of adult learning and education systems; setting quality standards, certifying adherence to these standards and disseminating, to the general public, information about providers adhering to the standards;
- (f) improving training, capacity building, employment conditions and the professionalization of adult educators;
- (g) enabling learners to acquire and accumulate learning, experiences and qualifications through flexible participation and accumulation of learning outcomes at different stages. Learning outcomes from participation in non-formal and informal adult learning and education should be recognized, validated and accredited as having equivalent values to those granted by formal education (e.g. in accordance with National Qualification Frameworks) to allow for continuing education and access to the labour market, without facing discrimination barriers.

## **IV. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**

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29. To promote the development and strengthening of adult learning and education, Member States should consider increasing cooperation between all relevant stakeholders, including governmental bodies, research institutions, civil society organizations, unions, development assistance agencies, the private sector and the media, whether on a bilateral or multilateral basis, and enhance United Nations interagency cooperation. Sustained international cooperation implies:
- (a) promoting and stimulating development within the countries concerned through appropriate institutions and structures adapted to the particular circumstances of those countries;
  - (b) creating a climate favourable to international cooperation with a view to capacity building in developing countries in different areas of adult learning and education and encouraging mutual cooperative assistance between all countries regardless of their state of development, as well as making full use of the advantage presented by mechanisms of regional integration to facilitate and strengthen this process;
  - (c) ensuring that international cooperation does not merely involve the transfer of structures, curricula, methods and techniques that have originated elsewhere.
30. Member States, as part of the international community, should consider sharing their experiences, increasing and improving mutual cooperative assistance, and help build each other's capacities in adult education, taking into account their national priorities. This implies:
- (a) fostering the regular exchange of information, documentation and materials on policies, concepts and practices and relevant research, as well as adult learning and education professionals at national, regional and international levels. The use and transfer of new

information and communication technologies should be maximized and the mobility of learners between Member States should be facilitated;

- (b) enhancing South-South, North-South and triangular cooperation, giving priority to countries where the education deficits are the widest, by applying findings from international reports and research;
- (c) collecting and presenting data on adult learning and education, through and with the support of UNESCO, including the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), and the established mechanisms to produce relevant reports, such as the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE). This implies the further enhancement of international data collection mechanisms based on agreed indicators and definitions, building on countries' capacities to produce data, and the dissemination of such data at various levels;
- (d) encouraging governments and development cooperation agencies to support the enhancement of local, regional and global cooperation and networking between all relevant stakeholders. Exploring how regional and global funding mechanisms for literacy and adult education could be established and strengthened and how existing mechanisms can support the international, regional and national efforts mentioned above;
- (e) incorporating, where appropriate, specific clauses relating to adult learning and education in international agreements concerned with cooperation in the fields of education, science and culture, and promoting the development and strengthening of adult learning and education efforts in the United Nations and UNESCO, and in the attainment of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

