

SUR LE TERRAIN

Grundtvig

A decade of European innovation in adult learning

What do Somali refugees in Liverpool, the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana and prison staff in the Bulgarian town of Lovech have in common? Surprisingly, they are all among the participants in the EU's programme for adult learning, 'Grundtvig', which this year celebrates its tenth anniversary.

Named after the Danish pastor N.F.S. Grundtvig, who is widely regarded as the founder of the Nordic tradition of lifelong learning, the programme encourages European cooperation in non-vocational adult learning – formal, non-formal and informal. It aims to help the Union address the educational challenge of an ageing population, and to develop innovative ways of providing adults with pathways to improve their knowledge and competences, as part of the EU's overall Lifelong Learning Programme.

Never has this been more important. In today's EU, there are still almost 80 million low-skilled adults and participation rates in learning still vary widely – from over 30% of the adult population in a few (mostly Nordic) countries, down to under 2% in others. The economic and financial crisis has also had a profoundly social dimension, accentuating the divide between the more affluent sections of the population and those at risk of social marginalisation.

Adult learning has an absolute vital role to play in helping to turn this situation around, by raising the knowledge, skills and competence profile of the adult population. It also helps combat social exclusion – not least through initiatives in inter-generational and inter-cultural learning, including increasingly important measures to promote the integration of ethnic minorities – and by encouraging active engagement with and involvement in society. No less fundamental is adult learning's role in helping people to derive a sense of personal fulfilment from their lives.

With just €60 million per year at its disposal – a modest 4% of the overall budget for the Lifelong Learning Programme – Grundtvig cannot address all of Europe's adult population's learning needs. What it can and does do, however – in tandem with other recent EU policy initiatives, including the Commission's 2007 Adult Learning Action Plan – is to show how European cooperation and mobility can help Member States tackle the problems and exploit the rich potential of the adult learning sector. By developing exciting new pedagogical approaches and materials, improving the profile and competences of the – often 'precarious' – staff in the field, creating



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sustainable networks for professionals, and experimenting with exciting new forms of adult learner mobility, Grundtvig projects and Learning Partnerships have given thousands of adult education organisations, their staff and learners a first encounter with partners in other European countries and a direct and positive experience of what 'Europe' can mean in their everyday lives and work.

These achievements are all the more noteworthy given that the adult learning sector – particularly as regards 'non-formal' and informal learning – is far less structured and far more diverse than the others and varies widely from country to country. Furthermore, it had very little previous tradition of practical cooperation on European projects and partnerships until Grundtvig came along.

Inclusion is central to Grundtvig's ethos. And, in a sense, Grundtvig 'takes over where other sectoral programmes stop', by providing 'second chance' learning opportunities, reaching out to marginalised groups, engaging with older citizens, and, perhaps most importantly of all, by reinforcing the sense of active citizenship among the adult population.

Grundtvig has continued to innovate and expand, and in 2009 a further series of new actions has been introduced, comprising additional mobility opportunities for staff (Visits & Exchanges and Assistantships) and learners (Workshops and Senior Volunteering Projects). The response has been highly encouraging.

Grundtvig – celebrating the first decade

To mark the programme's 10th anniversary, events are being held across Europe by the National Agencies, and two major European conferences – a large-scale dissemination event in Brussels which took place on 26th-28th January, and another in September – fittingly in Denmark. Grundtvig is also taking the lead on an important European conference on prison education, to be co-hosted by the Hungarian Prison Service in February.

The Brussels dissemination event attracted well over 300 policy-makers, project practitioners, NGOs and leading experts on adult learning from across the EU and beyond. Fifty of the best Grundtvig projects and partnerships were presented at the event, marking the beginning of DG EAC's contribution to the 2010 European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

The conference was opened by Maria-João Rodrigues, policy adviser to the EU institutions and a key figure in the Lisbon Strategy, who strongly underlined the importance of adult learning in all its facets for the success of the new "EU 2020" strategy – a view which was echoed and further developed by EAC Director-General Odile Quintin. Conference participants, with strong support from Doris Pack, chair of the EP's Committee for Culture and Education, called for the importance of adult learning – including the less directly vocational aspects which are the heart of Grundtvig – to be much better reflected in the next generation of the Lifelong Learning Programme, beginning in 2014.