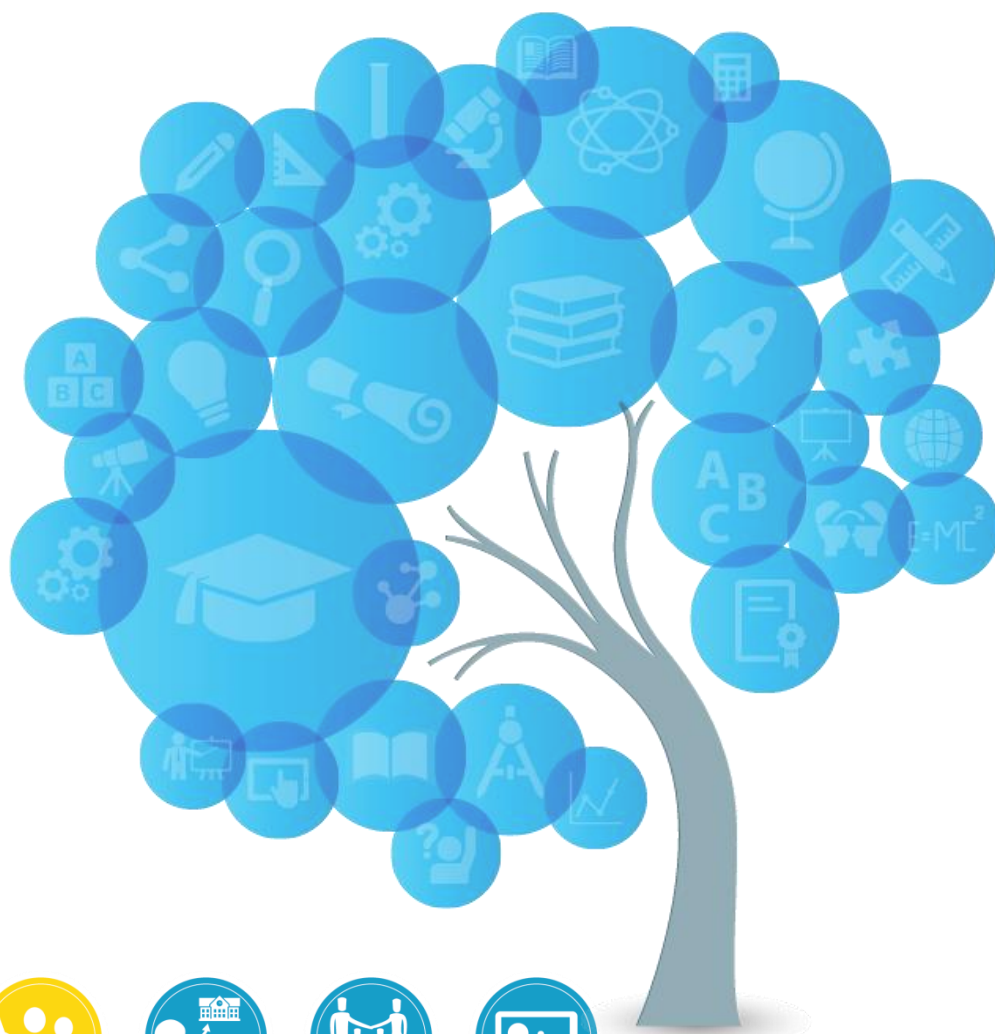




European
Commission



Adult Learning and COVID-19: challenges and opportunities

A REPORT FROM THE ET2020 WORKING
GROUP ON ADULT LEARNING

Produced by the ET 2020 Working Groups

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
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Abbreviations

AE	Adult Education
AL	Adult Learning
ANQEP	National Agency for Qualification (<i>PT: Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional</i>)
BMBF	Federal Ministry of Education and Research (<i>DE: Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung</i>)
COVID-19	(novel) Coronavirus disease
CPIA	Provincial centers for adult education and training (<i>IT: Centri Provonciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti</i>)
EAAL	European Agenda for Adult Learning
EC	European Commission
ESF	European Social Fund
ET2020	Education and Training 2020
EU	European Union
FAQ	Frequently Asked Questions
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IC	Intensive Care
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MS	Member States
NAVET	National Agency For Vocational Education And Training (Bulgaria)
SOLAS	Further Education and Skills Service (Ireland)
SURE	Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (EC Initiative)
SVEB	Swiss Association for Continuing Education
WBL	Work-based learning
VET	Vocational Education and Training

1.

Background and aim of the report

1.1. Background

Over the past few months, the outbreak of the coronavirus ('COVID-19 crisis') has risen to the scale of a global pandemic.¹ A total of 213 countries, areas or territories are currently affected². As more and more countries implement a range of measures to contain the COVID-19 crisis, including travel restrictions and various forms of 'lockdown', the effects of the crisis can be seen in almost all areas of society.

The world of education has been no exception. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a digitalisation of education and rapidly pushed education and training systems to explore new ways of teaching and learning. Stakeholders at all levels - governments, public and private organisations, communities and individuals - have been developing and implementing innovations and creative solutions to ensure that education systems can continue functioning in light of this.³ The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on adult learning (AL) has also been acute. Participation in adult learning has been impacted, with adult learning providers and educators facing multiple challenges in continuing their learning offers and adapting to the situation. The crisis, and its widespread impact on economies and societies globally, has also highlighted the prominent role for adult learning in a COVID-19 affected world. Within and beyond the crisis, adult learning is key in ensuring people can obtain the (new) skills and competences required in a COVID-affected labour market and society.

1.2. Aim of the report

This report aims to provide an insight into the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on adult learning, as well as into the role adult learning can play in the context of the crisis (and future similar crises). These insights aim to inform the discussion at Member State and European level on adult learning. The report focuses on the following **guiding questions**:

- What are the short- and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on areas that are indirectly affecting adult learning systems (e.g. economy, labour market etc.)?
- What are the short- and long-term impacts on adult learning systems (impact on providers and their teaching/training staff, modes of delivery)?
- What are the short- and long-term impacts on adult learners (as worker, parent, teacher and learner)?
- How is the adult learning system responding to the situation and to the learning needs of adults in particular?

¹ As indicated in the WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020, available online at: <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--11-march-2020>

² See for actual / up-to-date information: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

³ See for example: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/will-coronavirus-make-online-education-go-viral#survey-answer>

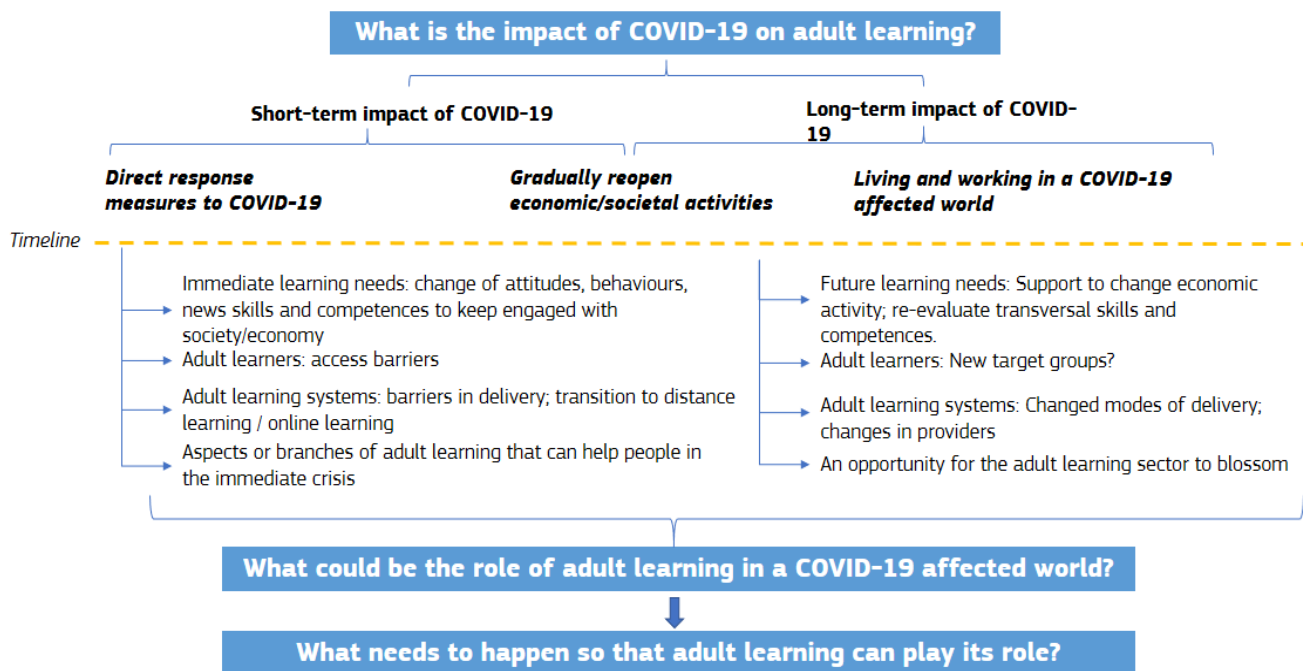
- What are the short- and long-term needs of adult learning systems so that they can provide services that better respond to the current situation?
- What needs to be considered most urgently for adult learning systems to be able to contribute to the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis?

These questions are supported by the following **sub-questions**:

- How (well) is the sudden transition to distant learning going for adult learning providers and adult learners? Are there differences in how types of providers make the transition (how easy/difficult is it for small education providers, for example)?
- What are (good) examples of initiatives emerging from the adult learning sector?
- Are there particular programmes, curricula, subject fields, etc. that are in higher demand currently?
- What stands out as the main benefit(s) that adult learning can offer people in coping with lockdown, confinement and all the other changes brought on by COVID-19? Why is adult learning now more important than ever?
- What are possible “impact scenarios” to consider in terms of what the world will look like ‘after’ the COVID-19 crisis – and what would this mean for adult learning?
- Does this crisis offer the adult learning sector a chance to show its worth and to emerge as an important sector?

The questions are summarised in the following overview.

FIGURE 1.1 QUESTIONS RELATED TO COVID-19 AND ADULT LEARNING



Source: author

The focus of this report is the **whole adult learning system or environment**. The report does not differentiate between sub-sectors focusing on basic skills, vocational education and training and in-company training, liberal education or adult learning in higher education. This is done to emphasise the sector-wide approach needed to respond to the emerging challenges and to emphasise that all sub-sectors have their own valuable contribution to the whole sector.

In literature and discussion papers on the COVID-19 crisis, other terms are used, such as ‘post-COVID-19 situation’, or ‘the new normal’. We do not yet know the long-term impact of COVID-19 on our future societies. This depends on many variables, such as whether there will be a second (or third) wave of infections, whether a vaccine will be found and widely available, whether the current situation leads to other challenges and tensions globally, or even whether another Corona-type virus will emerge. What we do, however, know is that societies and individuals need to prepare to cope with a new situation of insecurity, and the potential emergence of sudden shocks and unexpected circumstances, in the future, as experienced in the context of COVID-19. In this report, we use the term **‘COVID-19 affected future’** to refer to this situation. This term refers to the longer-term implications of COVID-19 – approximately one or two years from the outbreak – and refers to a world that is both potentially affected by pandemics, as well as facing increased health and environmental threats.

1.3. Methodological approach

The report is prepared by the ET2020 Working Group on Adult Learning. The research approach for this report included data collection through desk research of relevant publications on the COVID-19 situation, adult learning, future scenarios and others, sourced in different languages, as well as a written consultation and an online discussion with the members of the Working Group on Adult Learning in June 2020.

The report took into account written contributions from 24 countries, namely: Austria, Belgium, , Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Turkey.

2.

Setting the scene: What are the effects of COVID-19?

To situate the impact of COVID-19 on adult learning systems in Europe, this chapter provides a brief overview of the overall effects of COVID-19 on societal systems. Through this, the potential role and contribution of adult learning systems to dealing with the COVID-19 situation can be better understood. The macro- and meso level effects are briefly presented, together with the effects on individuals, and some early response scenarios.

2.1. COVID-19 effects on countries and their societal systems

From a global perspective (macro level), the overarching effects of the COVID-19 crisis, stemming from both the virus itself and the restriction measures put in place, are manifold. They are affecting countries, societies and communities at a national, international and global level. The COVID-19 crisis has created challenges for working environments, learning environments and the day-to-day life of individuals. It has also accelerated the shift of jobs and work tasks to online environments.⁴ Overall, the effects and challenges differ per 'system' or area of society, as outlined in below.

- **Health care systems** are seeing multiple challenges arise,⁵ such as: supply deficits (test kits, masks, Intensive Care beds, etc.), a sharp increase in the need for emergency rooms, intensive care units and support through other parts of the health care system, and increased fatigue of healthcare workers. At the same time, there has been a temporary increase in the number of healthcare workers during the crisis, as ex-healthcare workers have volunteered to return to work, and those in training (graduating cohorts) have already started working to provide support.
- **Economies** are simultaneously seeing supply shocks, due to decreases in employment and output, and drops in demand – both domestic and from abroad. The global stock market has reacted to the unpredictability with large drops, as traders have panic-sold out of fear⁶. Furthermore, current expectations are that GDP drops on a global scale will occur, while national reserves deplete, and country debts rise⁷. This may potentially lead to the largest economic crisis the world has seen since the Great Depression (e.g. since the 1930s). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has currently coined this crisis the 'Great lockdown'⁸, and their data shows that many countries are already facing a recession⁹, given that the national annual GDPs of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the US, for example, have already fallen by more than 5% for 2020 (with Italy seeing the highest reduction, at nearly -9%).
- **Labour Markets** are seeing a sharp rise in unemployment, for both young people and adults, and a sudden shift to 'teleworking' through the use of digital technologies. The extent to

⁴ See: European Commission (2020), Workforce skills and innovation diffusion: trends and policy implications, p. 3.

⁵ See: <https://www.bmj.com/content/368/bmj.m1090>

⁶ See: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/stock-market-volatility-coronavirus/>

⁷ See, for example: <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/04/05/coronavirus-expect-economic-pain-the-only-question-is-how-much/> and <https://www.cpb.nl/en/corona-crisis-scenarios#>

⁸ See: <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression/>

⁹ See figure at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225>

which this shift is possible varies between sectors and professions, and thus certain sectors (such as aviation and tourism) have been hit harder than others,¹⁰ with asymmetric effects across sectors. In the case of aviation companies, for example, it is expected to take years before air travel returns to pre-COVID-19 levels¹¹, meaning such companies are likely to greatly reduce the number of job positions in the meantime, causing unemployment to rise even further, depending on the type of lockdown measures implemented and how long they remain in place.

- **Education and Training Systems** are seeing an increasing number of institutions closing for face-to-face courses, along with a simultaneous shift to digital learning, in order to safeguard their current educational cohorts¹². Apart from this, mobility abroad and many international exchanges have been cancelled and, in most sectors,, work-based-learning programmes have been affected. Furthermore, there is an increased need for parents – often working parents – to actively facilitate their children’s learning leading to the challenges associated with juggling more ‘roles’ in their day-to-day life than before the crisis¹³.
- **Social security systems / social support systems** are seeing an increased need for support from various new and existing target groups, such as: unemployed persons, parents, teachers, students and social workers. Countries are introducing a variety of new social benefits or financial aid packages in order to mitigate the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 situation. These economic responses are, however, putting additional strain on the financial reserves of countries, resulting in a sharp increase of their national debt. An overview of EU economic responses to the crisis shows that national liquidity measures (including schemes under temporary, flexible, EU State aid rules) amount to roughly EUR 2,450 billion, and national measures taken under the flexibility of EU budgetary rules amount to EUR 240 billion¹⁴. At the international level, the Commission has launched the ‘SURE’ initiative, allocating EUR 100 billion of EU funding to finance short-term work schemes. There is also a support fund of EUR 240 billion available through the European Stability Mechanism Pandemic Crisis Support for Member States, and the European Investment Bank group has allocated around EUR 200 billion financing for businesses.
- **Political / governance systems** are facing the challenge of responding effectively to an unfolding event, without a clear indication of how long the crisis and subsequent effects will last and whether (or when) a second wave will present itself. Furthermore, these systems are seeing an increased need for consensus amongst different parties (governmental, private and public) while various measures are being implemented to respond to the COVID-19 situation, at national, international and global level. On the one hand, this could result in convergence towards better cooperation and relations at all levels. However, the ambiguous nature of rapidly changing events can also make the links between cause and consequence

¹⁰ See: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/coronavirus-a-labour-market-earthquake>

¹¹ See: <https://www.axios.com/future-air-travel-coronavirus-bcee181c-1d3a-4305-992d-053d5c80a909.html>

¹² See, for example: <https://www.wmca.org.uk/news/adult-education-providers-adapt-training-to-help-learners-during-covid-19-outbreak/> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/education-schools-coronavirus.html> and <https://www.rolandberger.com/en/Point-of-View/Three-scenarios-for-how-Coronavirus-may-affect-economies-and-industries.html>

¹³ See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-52145351> and <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Coronavirus-Complicates-an/248406>

¹⁴ See infographic at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/jobs-and-economy-during-coronavirus-pandemic_en

unclear, potentially resulting in divergence or the deterioration of relations, by, for example, parties seeking to lay blame elsewhere.

- The **environment and climate** are also affected by the COVID-19 situation. Reduced (air) travel and production has led to many regions experiencing decreases in air pollution. Furthermore, evidence suggest that there are already cleaner beaches and less environmental noise¹⁵. These positive effects are likely mostly temporary and are set to decrease when travel and production levels rise.

2.2. COVID-19 effects on individuals

The impact of COVID-19 on the above systems has wide-ranging consequences for individuals- both for those directly involved in the systems, such as organisations, institutions, businesses, employees, as well as for those seeking access to, or support from them, such as clients, patients, learners, or unemployed persons. The Eurofound e-survey ‘Living, working and COVID-19’, based on the answers of 85,000 respondents, shows the significant impact of COVID-19 on the quality of life, working conditions, employment, and broader society. The first findings of the survey are presented in the box 1.

Box 1 LIVING, WORKING AND COVID-19: FIRST FINDINGS OF EUROFOUND SURVEY

“Countries hardest hit by the pandemic see the most significant impact on their **well-being**. Results from some countries are particularly striking, with life satisfaction in France now at its lowest compared to surveys carried out before the crisis.

Over half of EU respondents are **concerned about their future** as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, with only 45% feeling optimistic. In contrast to surveys carried out before the pandemic, countries like France, Belgium, Italy and Greece are seeing optimism drop below the EU average.

People across the EU are reporting dramatically low **levels of trust in the EU** and in their national governments, particularly in several traditionally pro-EU Member States such as France, Italy and Spain, raising fundamental questions about perceived EU action during the crisis.

More than one-quarter of respondents across the EU at this stage report **losing their job** either temporarily (23%) or permanently (5%), with young men most affected. Half of those in work are also seeing their **working hours reduced**, especially in Romania, Italy, France, Cyprus and Greece. The Nordic countries have reported fewest reductions in working time.

Almost 40% of people in Europe report their **financial situation** as worse than before the pandemic – double the numbers reported in surveys before the crisis. Close to half are indicating their households cannot make ends meet and over half report they cannot maintain their standard of living for more than three months without an income. The situation is even more dramatic for three-quarters of those unemployed who cannot get by for more than three months, with 82% reporting their household has difficulty making ends meet.”¹⁶

Source: Eurofound (2020), *Living, working and COVID-19: First findings – April 2020, Dublin*¹⁷

¹⁵ See: Zambrano-Monserrate, Manuel A., Ruano, María Alejandra, Sanchez-Alcalde, Luis, (2020), Indirect effects of COVID-19 on the environment; in: Science of The Total Environment Volume 728, 1 August 2020, 138813

¹⁶ See: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2020/living-working-and-covid-19-first-findings-april-2020?utm_campaign=covid-19&utm_content=ef20058&utm_source=benchmark&utm_medium=email

¹⁷ See: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2020/living-working-and-covid-19-first-findings-april-2020?utm_campaign=covid-19&utm_content=ef20058&utm_source=benchmark&utm_medium=email

Whilst all individuals are affected by the COVID-19 crisis, the extent of this is inherently linked to individuals' (demographic) characteristics at the start of the crisis.¹⁸ Individuals' **'own' characteristics play a role in how they are affected by the COVID-19 crisis.** This includes characteristics such as: age, gender, employment status (i.e. whether they are contracted, freelancers, self-employed, unemployed or student/learner), socio-economic status (e.g. their income, education level, and occupation), and which sector they are employed in, if applicable. Other factors include the extent to which their job can be performed at a distance or in line with social distancing measures, whether they are formal carers for someone else (a parent, partner, other relative, close friend or neighbour), and their own overall health (e.g. the presence of pre-existing conditions).

Various aspects of their **living situation¹⁹ and family composition²⁰** also play a role in how individuals are affected. Depending on these characteristics, individuals – and especially adults – generally already balance several 'roles' within their daily lives, such as: their role as a professional, a job-seeker or a student, their role as a carer (parenting, formal caregiving), their role as a teacher (to their children), and their role as a member of a social circle (family, friends) and/or local community (volunteering). Due to travel restrictions and social distancing requirements put in place to manage the COVID-19 crisis, these roles now need to be balanced within a more restricted environment, which requires a higher degree of self-management than before. There are also groups that have seen an increase in the number of roles and responsibilities they need to balance. Working parents in particular have been affected in this regard, given that even before the COVID-19 situation, they were considered a group with a 'tough balancing act'. Adult learners have also been particularly affected, needing to balance an additional role of managing their own learning, alongside their other roles as a teleworker, home-teacher, carer etc.²¹

The changes that the COVID-19 crisis has introduced to society have required all individuals to adapt in multiple ways to a new reality, defined by restrictions on movement, a shift to digital working and/or learning, guidelines to follow in terms of social distancing and sanitation and more. This increases the need for various skills, especially soft skills, such as²²: self-management (and self-reliance), time-management, flexibility (in planning, workplace, etc.), adaptability, resilience, creativity, ingenuity, collaboration, communication, empathy, emotional intelligence²³ and digital literacy, that is the use of digital tools as well as the interpretation of digital information.

¹⁸ See for example: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Coronavirus-Complicates-an/248406> ;
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/us/work-from-home-mothers-coronavirus-covid19.html> ;

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-29/coronavirus-covid19-in-a-share-house-as-australia-in-new-reality/12097080>

¹⁹ NB: Whether they are living in social housing or private sector housing; whether they pay rent or mortgage, the amount of space (living area) at their disposal (in relation to the number of household members); the level of connectivity to internet, tv, etc. (quantity of devices, quality of connection); et cetera.

²⁰ NB: Whether they are single or with partner, and when applicable the employment status of the partner; whether there are children in the household or not (e.g. living with them), and whether these are in education (and at which educational level(s)); whether there is or base been a divorce – and whether there is a form of co-parenting put in place (e.g. 'parenting agreements' to uphold), et cetera.

²¹ See: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Coronavirus-Complicates-an/248406>

²² See for example: <https://www.euruni.edu/blog/skills-hot-demand-coronavirus-recovery/> ;

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/work/essential-job-skills-you-need-to-develop-to-survive-in-a-post-covid-19-world/articleshow/75721796.cms> ; and <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2020/04/06/gen-x-coronavirus-coping-skills/>

²³ NB: the ability to perceive, evaluate, and respond to your own emotions and the emotions of others (which includes effectively responding to and interacting with colleagues).

2.3. Uncertainty about future scenarios after COVID-19

Expectations in terms of how long the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on economies and other systems will last vary. They depend on multiple factors such as the severity and duration of lockdown measures, how long it will take to return to the ‘normal’ levels of production and consumption²⁴, and how much time economies will have to ‘recover’ from the first wave, before a second possible wave requires renewed attention.

Possible scenarios will have to reflect the fact that the COVID-19 crisis will undoubtedly lead to economic recession(s) at a global scale²⁵, resulting in increased national debts, high unemployment rates and increased demand for social support. Given that not all jobs are suitable for telework, **some sectors are at a particular disadvantage** compared to others and will likely suffer more job losses, increased reductions in working hours, and increased risk of business closures, etc.²⁶. The negative impact on ‘income-generating activities’ is also expected to be especially harsh for **unprotected workers**, and for the **most vulnerable groups** in the informal economy. In April, the ILO already estimated that a total of 1.25 billion workers – representing nearly 38% of the global workforce – are currently employed in sectors that are facing a severe decline in output, and are thus at a high risk of workforce displacement²⁷. This asymmetric effect on the labour market may result in a situation where job opportunities are available in sectors that were less affected by the crisis, with sectors most affected taking longer to return to pre-COVID levels of activity. For such sectors, the labour market will remain disadvantageous for some time for job-seekers, newly qualified persons (e.g. recent graduates), those already employed looking to switch jobs and for self-employed individuals (e.g. entrepreneurs). This is likely to be a particular issue in low- and middle-income countries, where the hardest-hit sectors generally have a high proportion of workers in informal employment, as well as workers with limited access to health services and social protection – thus facing a high risk of falling into poverty and experiencing greater challenges in regaining their livelihoods during the recovery period after the crisis²⁸.

In this context, Cedefop has developed a ‘social distancing risk index’ (called ‘Cov19R’) ²⁹ for the assessment of the potential risk of the COVID-19 pandemic for jobs and sectors. This index assesses “which individuals face a higher risk of coronavirus exposure by doing their jobs, and therefore need greater social distancing”. The table below provides insights into the sectors and occupations that, based on Cedefop’s assessment, can be considered at high or low social distancing risk – and thus a higher or lower risk of disruption by the COVID-19 situation.

TABLE 2.1 COV19R SCORE BY OCCUPATION GROUPS, EU-27 AND UK

Risk level	Sectors	Occupations
Very High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accommodation and food services Wholesale and retail trade, sales, shop work 	Care workers; Sales workers; Personal service workers; Hospitality & retail managers; Health

²⁴ See for example the publications: Scenarios economic consequences corona crisis (CPB Scenarios, March 2020); and Zukunftsinstitut White Paper: The Corona Effect — Four Future Scenarios (Zukunftsinstitut GmbH and Zukunftsinstitut Österreich GmbH, March 2020).

²⁵ NB: Through the accumulative effects of the bottlenecks in logistics (due to contact/travel restrictions), shutdowns of production lines, downturn in business investments and consumer spending, etc.

²⁶ See: <https://voxeu.org/article/covid-19-lockdown-and-eu-labour-markets>

²⁷ See: ILO (2020). ILO Monitor 2nd edition: COVID-19 and the world of work, Updated estimates and analysis.

²⁸ See: ILO (2020). ILO Monitor 2nd edition: COVID-19 and the world of work, Updated estimates and analysis.

²⁹ See: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/coronavirus-which-jobs-and-sectors-will-suffer-most> and <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/cedefop-creates-cov19r-social-distancing-risk-index-which-eu-jobs-are-more-risk>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social and personal services 	professionals; Food preparation helpers; Health associate professionals.
High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education or Health services • Agriculture, horticulture, forestry or fishing • Cultural industries (arts, entertainment) • Transportation or storage 	Drivers & vehicle operators; Cleaners and helpers; Customer clerks; Protection workers; Street services workers; Agricultural labourers; Farmworkers and gardeners; Construction workers; Business managers; Teaching professionals; Forest & fishery workers; CEOs, officials & legislators.
Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial, insurance or real estate services • Supply, management or treatment of water • Public administration and support services • Construction • Manufacturing 	Other elementary workers; Legal & social professionals; Technical labourers; Assemblers; Office associate professionals; Technical managers; Handicraft & printing workers; Machine & plant operators; Metal & machinery workers; Legal & social associate professionals; Electro engineering workers.
Very low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supply of gas or electricity, mining • Professional and scientific services • Information and communication technology 	Office professionals; Other support clerks; Office clerks; Accounting clerks; Science & engineering technicians; Researchers & engineers; ICT technicians; ICT professionals.

Source: Derived from 'Cedefop creates Cov19R social distancing risk index: which EU jobs are more at risk', Cedefop press release, 29-04-2020.

Cedefop's findings show that **vulnerable groups are particularly at risk of being affected by COVID-19 social distancing measures**, such as women, older employees, migrants, those lacking basic skills, low-qualified and low-educated adults. The same applies to those working in challenging working conditions (e.g. working longer hours; working from multiple sites, working in micro-sized workplaces; etc.)³⁰ There are also concerns that pre-existing inequalities between workers (and learners) will become increasingly visible and pronounced as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, especially in terms of the 'digital divide'³¹, due to the sudden shift to distance working and distance learning. The following groups of disadvantaged learners can be identified³²:

Box 2 GROUPS OF DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First-time mature students; • Low qualified adults (less than upper second level) • Low qualified migrants • Adults living in disadvantaged rural areas • Early school leavers • Long-term unemployed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single parents • Low income families • Homeless person • People with disabilities • People receiving social welfare • People living in poverty • Other vulnerable learners
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³⁰ See: 'Cedefop creates Cov19R social distancing risk index: which EU jobs are more at risk', Cedefop press release, 29-04-2020. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/cedefop-creates-cov19r-social-distancing-risk-index-which-eu-jobs-are-more-risk>

³¹ NB: in terms of access to digital resources (internet/devices) and people's capacity/skills to (learn how to) use them.

³² See: AONTAS (2020) Digital Learning and Disadvantage across Tertiary Education – A Discussion Paper. Draft Paper for the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group.

2.4. Implications of the COVID-19 crisis for adult learning

Within the context of learning, developments during the crisis show that **education systems overall are changing rapidly in the transition to distant learning**. This includes even finding remote learning solutions even for classes that are traditionally considered the most ‘physical’ in nature – such as sports in primary education, chemistry experiments in secondary education, and counselling in adult learning. Another positive development in this context is that – due to the travel restrictions put in place, local partnerships are emerging, in some cases through existing outreach networks, aimed at identifying and reaching various disadvantaged groups and connecting with people at community level.

On a more negative note, a great number of adult education programmes have stopped due to the crisis meaning that **learning has been disrupted for many adult learners**. This is impacting the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society more prominently – all the more so as they are the ones most in need of face-to-face courses.

Given the financial crisis that has affected a great number of families, the main priority of governments is now the most urgent societal needs, such as maintaining employment levels and salaries or at least household incomes. There are, however, indications that – due to the COVID-19 crisis – the topics of adult learning and informal learning have moved ‘from the margins of the discussion to the centre’³³. Adult learning is increasingly seen as a potentially **important ‘tool’ in the response to the crisis**. This is in part due to the role of adult learning in supporting local communities, intergenerational connections and learning through digital tools, as well as the closer links between adult learning and the health sector (providing public health-related information and training). Another positive development is the increase in freely available learning opportunities via digital forms of learning, which can be useful in further stimulating and facilitating learning overall. This can contribute to reducing inequalities, assuming the challenges regarding the digital literacy of the most disadvantaged groups are addressed first, and assuming that the various systems and learning platforms put in place to facilitate the digital shift are maintained after the crisis.

³³ As expressed during the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) webinars: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=albCTBngCKI>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2VpBVxp-wA>

3.

How is the adult learning sector coping with COVID-19?

This chapter examines how adult learning – organisation, delivery, participation and outreach – is affected by the COVID-19 crisis and outlines some of the response measures adopted by the sector. It will then explore how adult learning is responding to the changed circumstances.

3.1. Adult learning provision continued, be it online.

All 24 countries consulted for the report (see list in section 1.3) reported that, since mid-March, all **education being delivered face-to-face has been discontinued**, at least until the beginning of May 2020. This is also true for adult learning courses and also largely applies to learning provided in the workplace, which is no longer taking place given that workers are not present in the workplace. On the other hand, as workers have been unable to perform some work tasks, some companies have **encouraged workers to engage in training**. Countries reported that in cases where training in the workplace has continued throughout the COVID-19 crisis, it has been in online form.

The box below provides an overview of the state of adult learning throughout the COVID-19 crisis, with countries grouped under three categories: physically closed with limited online activities; physically closed and getting re-organised online; and finally, largely online, with some possibilities for physical interaction.

Box 3 THE STATE OF ADULT LEARNING THROUGHOUT THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Physically closed, with limited online activities:

- In **Turkey**, most of the adult education activities are provided by public education centres affiliated to the Ministry of National Education and are closed due to COVID-19.
- In **Switzerland**, since 13 March, all physical provision of adult learning is forbidden. Although courses and training programmes could still be delivered online in some contexts, many of them had to be cancelled.
- In **Latvia**, since 13 March, education in all sectors is physically closed and provided only through distance learning. Physical provision of adult learning is forbidden, too. Many adult education providers deliver programmes through different platforms and tools, online and TV classrooms (Tava klase) and social media platforms. Since 1 June, adult learning with physical contact restarted with some restrictions in place.

Physically closed, and getting re-organised online:

- In **Austria**, adult education institutions are not allowed to hold physical classes due to COVID-19 regulations and laws. Wherever possible, education institutions are using online learning methods. However, this poses challenges, especially in the field of guidance, as data security issues arise when using e-mail instead of face-to-face consulting.

- In **Bulgaria**, A NAVET survey³⁴ shows that, out of the 110 licensed centres that responded to the survey, around 30% continued providing vocational training for adults, mainly by distance learning. This shows that the VET system, adapts relatively easily to the new circumstances, especially for adults, despite the difficulties that individual learners may experience.
- In **France** almost all the training providers have organised pedagogical continuity through email, telephone, online courses, simulation and educational game platforms.
- In **Luxembourg**, most of the adult learning community provides the same amount of support and learning content to learners. Most providers set up distance learning and e-learning facilities to do so. A priority was to maintain the offer of upskilling pathways, basic skills and language learning for the integration of migrants. The main challenges encountered were: (1) how to set up simple tools to account for the teachers' and the learners' lack of digital skills; (2) how to improve the self-learning capacity of adults in a sustainable way; (3) the lack of digital resources developed and available at the beginning of the crisis³⁵; (4) the need to redefine the role of teachers as mentors, rather than them being the only source of knowledge for learners; and (5) the risk of restricting access to adult learning for people with low literacy or digital skills and for people facing psychological issues. Good practices identified were: dividing the teacher's tasks into two teams: one for material- development and one for student-support; improved sharing and exchange of information between teachers and other staff members; and developing the digital tools that will be used in the future, even after physical classes can resume (thus opening new possibilities for learning centres).
- In **Slovenia**, due to the already high level of flexibility in the provision of adult learning, it was relatively easy to move to digital learning. Some activities - such as the Lifelong Learning Week and the Learning Parade - have been postponed to the autumn months, but nothing has so far been cancelled. Overall, activities are linked to financing of staff and material costs in line with institutions' work plans via the national budget or ESF funds. It is estimated that between 50%–70% of the programmes are delivered at a distance. Most adult learning institutions are adapting all their activities to the current situation and have started to deliver programmes and courses at a distance: for example through different platforms and tools, apps, video conference systems and online classrooms, and social media platforms; but also by using emails and /or phone calls and in rare cases also by regular mail ('snail mail'). The decision on which new forms of programme delivery is to use is made on the basis of the target group of adult learners and their ability to use ICT for communication with their teachers and counsellors for learning purposes. Furthermore, for activities related to animation and motivation, providers even use local radio and TV channels. There are practices also promoting lifelong guidance³⁶ through the local TV channel³⁷.
- In **Sweden**, nearly all adult training and education is now being done in the form of online distance learning. The transition has occurred rather smoothly, since even before the COVID-19 crisis, a large part of adult education was already being provided through distance learning meaning that most providers already had hands-on experience with it.

³⁴ <https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/do-direktori-na-tspo/>

³⁵ NB: Given that adult learning, in particular, is mainly based on direct contact with learners, including a strong focus on social and personal support.

³⁶ <http://tvu.acs.si/paradaucenja/video3/>

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6IU200rOq0>

- In **Portugal**, training providers and Qualifica Centres³⁸ have made a fast transition to working online with adults. In the case of Qualifica Centres, more than 85% have continued their activities with adult learners. For adults with access to the internet, providers have implemented training solutions through online platforms available. Furthermore, the services responsible for adult learning (e.g. ANQEP (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional) and for funding (e.g. Human Capital Operational Programme) have made guidelines available for adult learning in this period of lockdown.
- In **Croatia**, adult education institutions switched to online teaching at the same time as all other educational institutions. Many institutions already conducted online classes before the crisis (especially foreign language programmes, digital skills acquisition and various other courses) and continued their classes during the lockdown. Institutions that did not previously conduct online classes, switched to a new form of work using their own resources, but with the help and advice of the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education. In this way, many programmes continued to be implemented. The Ministry of Science and Education has systematically made recommendations related to the implementation of teaching and evaluation of learning outcomes in the online environment.
- In **Ireland**, mid-March, all educational establishments were closed. The Further Education and Training sector put contingency plans in place to support learning needs. Education and Training Boards continue to offer Adult Guidance and information supports in various formats such as online chats, telephone, email etc. The majority of staff are using online resources to engage with learners and to offer some level of continuation of the learning process. Communication channels being used include non-digital and digital means. A range of platforms are being used. As part of SOLAS (Further Education and Training authority) response to COVID-19, access to online learning through eCollege has been expanded by providing courses available free of charge on a temporary basis. While the service is usually orientated towards the unemployed and vulnerable workers, it was opened up as a support to those effected by COVID-19. eCollege provides online courses including computer programming, data science, and web and graphic design, and involves both tutor support and independent study.

Largely online, with some possibilities for physical interaction:

In some countries, lockdown has not been as restrictive, leaving some – albeit limited – possibilities for physical meetings or work-based learning.

- In **the Netherlands**, for instance, whilst in general training should be organised at a distance, there are a few exceptions. Vulnerable students for whom learning at a distance is not an option, are allowed to physically come to the location of the school, in small groups and in adherence with national health regulations. The same applies to VET students who have to prepare for or take exams.
- In **Belgium (BE-FR)**, in formal adult education, face-to-face learning activities were suspended, but courses were organised at a distance wherever possible. Internships were maintained to the extent possible and under the responsibility of the trainee's workplace. Teaching activities are not going to be extended to the months of July and August, with the exception of what was already planned by some institutions. In non-formal education, most learning paths stopped, as the majority needed a face-to-face approach, except for certain

³⁸ NB: Qualifica centers are specialised adult qualification centres.

courses in ICT. As in formal education, distance learning was used by public training centres, whenever possible.

- In **Denmark**, adult education providers have, whenever possible, moved to a model of split teaching, with the theoretical parts of the curriculum completed online, while the practical parts that require physical attendance postponed. The adult education programmes are organised in a decentralised structure in Denmark, which gives each institution the freedom to organise their teaching as they see fit as long as it is within the regulatory framework. Hence, the agency does not have the full overview of how teaching is carried out based on the temporary COVID-19 legislation. Nonetheless, education institutions have proven to be highly adaptable: on short notice, they were able to offer online teaching and support in a range of subjects. Moreover, selected adult vocational programmes directly linked to critical services in the health, medical equipment and transportation sector were allowed to open in order to use the lockdown to upskill and reskill workers in sectors with a growing demand. Young adults with severe personal and/or physical problems and at risk of falling into temporary social isolation were allowed to attend teaching in person at their education institution, if deemed necessary (and if current regulations from health authorities were complied with).

There are **big differences between adult learning sectors** in terms of the extent to which they can continue their courses online. In general, **formal learning providers are better equipped** to make the transition than non-formal adult learning providers. The main factor, however, influencing the adaptability of education providers is whether providers already had **prior experience** in offering training online. The box below provides examples from several countries that illustrate the differences between adult learning sub-sectors as well as the differences between experienced and in-experienced adult learning providers.

Differences between adult learning sub-sectors:

- In **Cyprus**, distance and online learning were not a part of the everyday practice of adult education institutions. **Formal adult education** institutes (evening schools) introduced synchronous and asynchronous education for adult students in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Distance learning platforms are used, but there is also exchange via e-mail, in case teachers are not yet familiar with the use of the other tools. Teachers are also allowed to use any other open source e-learning tool. In addition, supportive educational material for all classes and levels is being uploaded on the Ministry and individual school websites. However, in the **non-formal adult learning sector**, where the field is less systematized and coordinated, programmes were suddenly interrupted due to the COVID-19 crisis, with a great number of adult learners not attending physical learning. In this sector, the shift to distance and on-line learning modes was not feasible, not only because of the general lockdown (March-April 2020) but also because of programmes officially ended in May.
- In **Czechia**, transition to online education was easier for some sectors than others. **Language schools**, for instance, faced fewer challenges because their students were already well-prepared for this way of learning. Furthermore, the theoretical parts of these courses can be implemented equally well, through online means, such as teleconferencing, Skype, video calls, etc. However, this form of teaching is possible only if the course participant agrees to be taught this way, and if all participants have the necessary material and technical equipment. Training providers who have not been able to provide these conditions have therefore not been able to continue activities and have lost a significant part of their profits. For most educational institutions, the shortfall in income is 80–100%, whereas the financial shortfall will not be felt by about 5% of institutions that are not dependent on invoicing – i.e. schools and libraries.

Differences between experienced and in-experienced adult learning providers:

- In **Croatia**, adult education institutions that had provided online teaching prior to the COVID-19 crisis did not have any major challenges in adapting. However, institutions that had no online teaching experience prior to the crisis encountered problems due to lack of equipment. Teachers in adult education institutions who work also in regular schools have acquired sufficient digital skills for distance learning, thanks to teacher training required by the ongoing educational reform. By contrast, teachers who work only in adult education institutions, especially in those who do not have experience of conducting distance learning, have had difficulties.
- In **Norway**, the level of digitisation among the adult learning centres varies a lot. During the COVID-19 crisis, many of the centres have had to close completely, and no training has been provided. The physical facilities of the centres also vary. This means that some centres will have problems when they re-open, given the limitations of social distancing. Adult learning centres that had already digitised their teaching have had fewer challenges than the centres that had not. Good practices in innovative ways to continue adult learning provision have been shared, both bilaterally and multilaterally – for example through Facebook groups, organised by Skills Norway. When the crisis hit, Skills Norway was already in a process of revising the Norwegian language training system and the system of general preparation for newcomers. Parts of the new system will now be implemented earlier than the original schedule.

In **Italy**, a short survey was conducted of school leaders responsible for the training provision for adults, managed and coordinated by the Ministry of Education (offering training to approximately 260,000 learners). The survey examined how teaching activities were reorganised during the COVID-19 crisis. The survey outcomes serve as an illustration of how the adult learning sector is dealing with distance learning. The main results are presented in the box below.

Box 5 SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF ITALIAN SURVEY OF SCHOOL LEADERS RESPONSIBLE FOR ADULT LEARNING

Italy: Short survey of school leaders responsible for the training provision for adults, managed and coordinated by the Ministry of Education (offering training to approximately 260,000 learners)

The survey showed that distance learning:

1. Covered all educational pathways offered, as well as language literacy pathways (Italian levels A1 and A2) for migrant adults;
2. Is carried out to a large extent by using WhatsApp (first choice), applications (e.g.GSuite); E-Learning Platforms (Edmodo, Classroom, WeSchool); Video classroom Platforms (Google Meet, Zoom, Skype, Jetsi); E-mail; Web Radio, TV Channels; and Youtube;
3. Directly involved 25,316 students, enrolled in courses aimed at obtaining the title of first cycle of secondary school (compulsory education);
4. 17,872 learners, enrolled in A1-level language literacy courses;
5. 19,661 learners ,enrolled in A2-level language literacy courses;
6. Reached a total of 62,950 learners (as of 15 April: start date of lockdown 8 March);
7. Implied learning assessments in 87% of cases;
8. Required a strong collaboration of Digital Animators (a role played by specific teachers) in order to support both teachers and learners. The use of these specialists occurred in 95.6% of cases considered.

Furthermore, for learners without devices or connections, alternative materials were only in place in 72% of cases; and no specific materials were prepared for students with disabilities in about 24% of the cases that would have required it.

Generally, therefore, **adult learning providers have been disrupted, but have found ways to continue their training online**. The formal sub-sectors and those providers that were already experienced in online learning clearly faced less challenges than other providers. Overall, adult learning providers found quick workarounds (in terms of using email, telephone, online platforms etc.) to continue serving their learners. Some of the more specific aspects of adult learning, such as those requiring more intensive physical interaction (counselling, training using specific equipment etc.), however, have had to be put on hold.

3.2. Main challenges for adult learning

In many countries, adult learning providers had to temporarily suspend their teaching activities following lockdown measures. At the same time, however, they had to guarantee their students a continuity of learning, in order to achieve certification. The following sections (3.2.1-3.2.3) provide further insights into the main challenges of this situation, from different perspectives: the sector level, the level of the provider and the adult learner level.

3.2.1. The sector faces challenges in organising education activities online and ensuring equal access

All countries reported that they have faced challenges related to organising their education activities online. The main challenges relate to transforming face-to-face courses into online courses, establishing online relationships with learners, and securing the required equipment and infrastructure. This transformation has also involved critically looking at which elements of adult learning courses can be shifted online and which cannot. Social aspects, empowering aspects and work-based learning parts of adult learning appear to be more challenging to move online. Furthermore, assessment and examinations, especially in formal adult learning also pose challenges. The box below provides examples of challenges identified in the consulted countries. They are grouped under the following categories: challenges in organising education activities online; challenges in transforming face-to-face elements into online learning environments; and challenges related to assessment and examination in formal education.

Box 6 CHALLENGES FACED BY THE ADULT LEARNING SECTOR

Challenges in organising education activities online:

- In **Bulgaria**, some adult learning courses had to be terminated, as practical training could not take place. Furthermore, trainees refused to complete training courses already started. This has led to reduced income for training providers. Public training providers can benefit from national financial support during the state of emergency, but this is not available to private providers, some of whom will likely have to cease operations as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.
- In **Ireland**, learner settings are highly varied and complex ranging from colleges, training centres, youth centres, community settings and prison education which causes challenges in establishing online courses. Although staff have demonstrated agility and responsiveness in identification and use of new methods to support learning, there remain challenges related to ICT equipment, internet connectivity and capacity to deliver virtual classroom in all these settings.
- In **Switzerland**, the crisis has led to a digital boost in the sector with many providers swiftly switching to online. However, other providers' "digital response" was much slower or not existent. Challenges include a lack of sufficient skills of practitioners and high set-up costs which require investment/funding.

Challenges relates to how face-to-face elements can be shifted to online learning environments:

- In **Cyprus**, programmes which belong to the general adult education sector, have a strong social character and human interaction is at the heart of their operation. Social distancing has thus posed a big challenge for the sector that has yet to be addressed.
- In **Bulgaria**, training is not only about providing access to educational material, but - especially for adult learners - is also about individual and group feedback from the teacher or trainers, as well as the ability to test what has been learned.
- In **Ireland**, the challenge has been around peer learning for adult learners, which is less easily facilitated online than in face-to-face courses. While providing learning material online is not that challenging, solving these feedback and assessment issues is more problematic,

with the shift to online delivery and assessment requiring a complete re-thinking of the existing course offer.

- In **Croatia**, challenges in adapting to COVID-19 restrictions have also been centred around the practical training offer, which is part of most programmes in adult education. For now, work-based learning has been discontinued.
- **Sweden** reported that some aspects of adult education and learning do not work well as distance education. In particular, this is the case for language education at beginners level (e.g. Swedish for immigrants). There is therefore a need to learn more about how different groups are coping with the transition to distance learning, and what can be done to help them.

Challenges related to assessment and examination in formal education:

- In **Hungary**, for instance, professional examinations cannot be organised whilst the Government decree declaring a state of emergency is legally in force. The exams missed and postponed can only be conducted once the state of emergency has been called off. These exams are to be finished – at the latest – within 60 days from the termination of the emergency.

Another key challenge is the issue of **equal access to learning opportunities**. The shift to online delivery causes difficulties for adult learners from specific vulnerable groups. Learners lacking digital competences, and/or ICT tools, as well as those that face health-related challenges cannot always find and access adult learning activities online. Often, the online offer is fragmented and untransparent. This is not only a challenge for individual adult learning providers but for the sector as a whole. **Support structures need to be established to reach out** to new adult learners and support existing adult learners in selecting and participating in courses effectively in this new online mode. There are also specific sub-sectors where organising distance learning poses additional challenges, such as in prison education. The box below provides examples of challenges identified in the consulted countries.

Box 7 SPECIFIC CHALLENGES IN REACHING CERTAIN LEARNERS

In **Cyprus**, the introduction of new modes of learning delivery has highlighted the need to ensure that adult learners have the skills, infrastructure and equipment to participate in these new modes of learning. Equal participation and access for all is a very important goal and can be ensured through supporting adult learners in other ways as well, such as through guidance and training, to enable them to participate effectively and fully in the programmes.

In **Estonia**, a key challenge is that information on non-formal training opportunities has been divided and fragmented, meaning that potential learners do not have a complete overview of what is on offer.

In **Switzerland**, as a large part of the courses and programmes have been cancelled, many learners, have no access to learning at all. Furthermore, for learners lacking basic ICT and/or literacy skills, attending online courses is very challenging or even impossible.

In **Italy**, adult prison education faces many difficulties in providing distance education particularly because internet access is prohibited for this group of adult learners. In 20% of cases it was not possible to produce specific activities or materials to make up for this.

3.2.2. Adult learning providers and staff face challenges in capacities, infrastructure and funding

Adult learning providers have also faced challenges linked **to the online training capacities of staff and providers**. As mentioned already, providers that have experience in online education have generally been better equipped to make this transition during the COVID-19 crisis. Others have been ‘thrown in the deep end.’ Whilst many adult learning providers have adjusted quickly and well, **gaps in the digital competences of adult learning providers have affected the quality of training** offered during the crisis.

While the focus to date has been mostly on making the education offer available online, in the future **adult providers should focus on increasing the quality of the instructional design of the online offer**, improving the quality of the delivery, and ensuring that learners reach the desired learning outcomes through the online offer. Delivering online training does not only require providers and staff to have digital competences, but also – and even more so – requires **strong tutoring and assessment skills** and the ability to be **flexible and adaptable** to changing circumstances. The box below provides examples reported by some countries of challenges related to skills of trainers and professionals.

Box 8 CHALLENGES RELATED TO SKILLS OF TRAINERS AND PROFESSIONALS

In **France**, challenges relate mainly to the trainers, as some have never been involved in online training offers. For this purpose, online training programmes were designed and delivered.

In **Estonia**, the skills of trainers, as well as the skills of learners, in using digital environments are at very different levels, thus greatly influencing the quality of training (depending on their choice of platform and their ability to use it).

In **Germany**, teachers and tutors are not qualified enough in the field of online-tutoring and are not experienced in keeping in touch with their learners regularly, while physical learning environments (such as learning-café) are closed.

In **Slovenia**, professionals have made an effort to motivate participants to continue their learning process throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This was a challenge for professionals themselves, who have tested their personal flexibility and knowledge, with most performing well. Learning providers have also faced challenges in keeping organisations functioning online. This is addressed by setting up regular team meetings online – mainly through video conference systems (leading to multiple systems being used in one institution). For support with printing, mailing or other administrative tasks, they have individual access to the premises or head offices.

In **Italy**, the COVID-19 crisis has made it clear that it is necessary to invest heavily in the skills of teachers, in terms of digital skills, upskilling on specific teaching methodologies, and on the way in which adapting educational materials can be planned and implemented.

In **Spain**, it is necessary to reinforce the training plans of adult education professionals so they can move from face-to-face to distance teaching in the short term. Alongside this, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need to increase digital skills development in society as a whole, through lifelong education programmes and training for employment, and by promoting a “culture of knowledge” across more levels of Spanish society.

Countries also mentioned that ensuring they had the **infrastructure and equipment necessary to organise the learning online** was a challenge for adult learning providers and adult educators. Many adult learning providers were not prepared to completely shift their offer to online modes of delivery. They have faced challenges in terms of:

- ensuring the availability of computers and recording equipment at the institution and at home for the adult educators
- providing reliable servers and server capacity,
- providing access to learning software and learning platforms.

Ensuring adequate working conditions (workplace, working hours) of adult educators also requires attention. The box below provides examples of challenges identified in the countries.

Box 9 CHALLENGES RELATED TO INFRASTRUCTURE AND EQUIPMENT

In **Norway**, there are challenges in some adult learning centres in terms of facilities (a lack of PCs, tablets and smart phones).

In **Ireland**, there are challenges for some staff in terms of adequate internet connectivity and digital technology.

In **Slovenia**, the necessary infrastructure is lacking for some institutions and adult educators.

In **Spain**, educational administrations need to reinforce the digital equipment at adult education centres, as well as the implementation of online teaching platforms. In this, establishing alliances to provide the most vulnerable learners with these tools is key.

A last key concern emerging for the adult education sector throughout the COVID-19 crisis is whether **funding** is and will continue to be available for adult learning providers. This is especially a concern for adult learning that is funded based on demand, for instance through invoices to adult learners or companies. Adult learning providers and adult educators are also incurring additional expenses to set up ICT infrastructure to deliver courses, for which they are not necessarily compensated. A specific group that is hit hard by the crisis are **freelance trainers**, whose income has completely diminished throughout this time. Finally, funding challenges may also arise in relation to ESF-funded projects, which may be experiencing delays, due to the crisis. The box below provides examples of challenges identified in the countries consulted.

Box 10 CHALLENGES RELATED TO FUNDING

In the **Netherlands**, providers of basic skills classes that are funded by municipalities, for instance, have difficulty living up to the agreements made in their tendering or subsidy contracts with municipalities (related to the specified number of physical classes). This is in part due to the mandatory closure of their locations. The Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) has called upon municipalities to continue paying the providers they have contracts with.³⁹

In **Estonia**, there are concerns that additional costs will be incurred by providers for the use of licensed computer programmes, bigger screens for longer working days online, internet solutions, etc.

In **France**, while there are still some unused resources, training providers have had to be made aware of existing support and funding possibilities as they are facing funding challenges.

In **Switzerland**, the suspension of education and training leads to huge losses for providers and freelancers in the sector. This is further impacted by the fact that companies are and will be reducing their budgets for adult learning, making funding of courses potentially problematic for many adult learners. This could have a negative impact on demand in the medium and long term.

³⁹ See: https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/2020-03/20200318_ledenbrief_gevolgen-uitbraak-coronavirus-voor-gemeenten-en-vng.pdf

In **Slovenia**, the adult learning sector is highly dependent on freelance trainers, whose situation is more difficult than ever, given that when there are no courses, they do not earn. The state will reimburse them a part of their costs and taxes.

3.2.3. Adult learners lack equipment, time and capacities: the vulnerable are disproportionately affected

The COVID-19 crisis is not only affecting the adult learning sector in general, or adult learning providers, but also, and most significantly, it is impacting adult learners themselves. A general challenge faced in many countries is the **lack of equipment, time for learning and digital capacities of the learners**. Adult learners often do not have devices through which they can access online learning environments; others have to share these devices with other members of their household. This negatively affects their possibilities for learning. Furthermore, balancing their learning with their working and caring responsibilities is also a challenge for adult learners. Many adults, for example, have had to cope with the sudden shift to home-schooling for their children in addition to their normal daily tasks. Finally, adult learners might not only lack basic digital skills to successfully use digital learning environments, but even more fundamentally, they **may lack self-directed learning skills** and the skills to self-motivate to learn (as reported for Ireland). The box below provides examples of challenges related to the lack of equipment and skills for online and self-managed learning, as identified in the countries consulted.

Box 11 CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE LACK OF EQUIPMENT AND SKILLS FOR ONLINE AND SELF-MANAGED LEARNING

In **Austria**, during the COVID-19 crisis, it is harder to reach those that are unable to switch to home office solutions due to their limited digital skills and lack of technical equipment.

In **Bulgaria**, entire families have been working and studying at home, but without the equipment to facilitate this. A lack of sufficient technical support and of enough time for using computer or other devices was also identified as a challenge for learners.

In **France**, not all learners have a computer or a tablet, but most of them have a phone by which they can be reached. Some learners have never used a computer to train, and furthermore, it is tiring and demands a lot of concentration which can be very difficult for adult learners, especially persons in disadvantaged and vulnerable positions.

In **Ireland**, some learners have inadequate internet connectivity and access to digital technology. Also learners might lack adequate study space in the home environment which can affect motivation.

In **Germany**, participants do not have the necessary technical equipment. They may have a smartphone, but generally no laptop, printer, etc.

In **Portugal**, the main challenges are related to adults with low literacy skills and adults without access to the internet or equipment (computer or tablet). Although there are measures in place to maintain adult learning, the number of adults with access to learning provision has decreased significantly as a result of this. A lack of motivation has also contributed, and is associated with fear and anxiety. The learning needs, at this moment, include health literacy and new forms of work and social life.

In **Italy**, not all students have the devices to be able to take part in distance learning. Some adult learning centres (CPIAs) have distributed tablets and notebooks, but the number of devices available is significantly lower than demand.

In **Denmark**, the switch to online teaching has posed a number of challenges as some learners lack sufficient IT-skills and/or equipment, and both teachers and learners are inexperienced with online teaching. It has been more difficult to support and reach out to learners with special needs without the physical presence of teachers and learners.

In **Spain**, there is still a need to increase adult learners' basic skills - especially digital skills, which will allow learners to use digital tools and take advantage of the available training offers online. Nevertheless, in recent years the number of participants in distance and online learning modalities has grown, showing that this transition is taking place in a slow and progressive way. Whilst this has not been without difficulties on the part of adult education centres dependent on public administrations, this transition has helped ensure that a great number of adult learners were already enrolled in distance learning and online environments, whilst many others who were attending face-to-face modalities have been able to move online during the COVID-19 crisis.

In **Slovenia**, the necessary infrastructure (computers, laptops, internet access etc.), has been an obstacle to continuing adult learning throughout the crisis, especially for learners from vulnerable target groups.

In **Switzerland**, for some learners, access to online learning is limited. Many migrants, for example, do not have access to a computer and face difficulties accessing a course via smartphone.

In **Belgium (BE-FR)**, not all learners (especially the low - skilled ones) have the necessary technical equipment (computers, internet access) and when they have, priority in a household is often given to children's online courses.

Challenges in terms of equipment, time and capacities for online learning affect nearly all adult learners. For most, though, these are mainly been temporary challenges, experienced at the start of the crisis and resolved once learners have organised themselves for the 'new normal' and been able to continue some form of learning. This is not the case for **adult learners that were already in a vulnerable position** at the start of the COVID-19 crisis, however. A key challenge for the adult learning sector is the fact that adult learners, and low-skilled adult learners in particular, come from diverse social and economic groups which are already more severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis – such as the elderly, prisoners, adults with low digital skills, unemployed adults, persons with disabilities, health issues and/or anxiety issues. The COVID-19 crisis has put people and businesses in 'waiting mode' (as indicated in **Bulgaria**), increasing the risk of social isolation, particularly for these more vulnerable groups. The **adult learning sector needs to be able to reach them and respond to their different needs as well as their different skill levels**, in order to achieve its overall objective: to support the upskilling and re-skilling of those in disadvantaged positions, for a better future. The box below provides examples of challenges related to specific vulnerable groups identified in the countries.

Box 12 CHALLENGES RELATED TO SPECIFIC VULNERABLE GROUPS

A challenge in **Estonia** relates to low-educated and older adults, as they do not have the necessary skills or technical facilities to continue their learning.

In **Malta**, adult learning providers are aware that during the COVID-19 crisis, online learning seemed to be reaching only certain people, with more vulnerable cohorts harder to reach. Individuals who were either digitally illiterate, had limited access to the right devices, did not have an adequate strong internet connection or had home situations which did not permit for remote learning were impacted the most.

In **Luxembourg**, recently arrived refugees (from various countries) have been particularly unable to continue their learning throughout the crisis, due to their specific housing situation in the refugee camps (e.g. no quiet learning spaces, no childcare, in some cases no WIFI, smartphones or other device, and/or the lack of knowledge to use them). The shift to distance learning has therefore reduced the support to vulnerable groups as it (1) makes it harder for some learners to communicate one-on-one with teachers or trainers (due to language barriers), (2) requires a higher degree of self-management, which puts especially the illiterate and the elderly at risk of exclusion, and (3) increases the social distance between the teacher or counsellor and the students, resulting in a lack of confidence and mutual trust. Overall, investing in digital literacy and its integration into all kinds of courses is considered crucial for the adult learning provision of the future.

In **Slovenia**, the transition from traditional to distance learning and education was particularly hard for certain vulnerable groups of adults including the low-skilled, those with low social status, the socially isolated, the elderly, and Roma people. Some vulnerable adults use digital devices, but in most cases not for learning (e.g. low-qualified older workers, who will remain on the labour market for at least another 5- 10 years), and thus do not easily perceive that phones can be used as a tool for learning. Some groups of elderly do not use digital devices at all. This has posed a big barrier in their transition to distance learning, with low motivation as a result, also playing a role.

In **the Netherlands**, COVID-19 is a challenging time for learners with low basic skills. In general, they do not always understand what the national regulations around COVID-19 are, nor why these are in place. Engaging them in and keeping them motivated through online learning can be particularly difficult, especially when they have limited digital skills.

In **Norway**, while there are government arrangements to mitigate some of the most pressing challenges brought on by the COVID-19 crisis, some of the courses for people working in the healthcare sector (such as doctors and nurses), have low attendance because these people cannot devote time to attending courses now.

3.3. Sector responses to the COVID-19 situation

In most countries, COVID-19 response measures and support packages have been implemented to support the economy and society through the crisis. Often, these support packages are linked to other reform priorities such as greening – for example, economic sectors receiving support when they also implement greening policies.

Related to adult learning, millions of learners in Europe have been forced to learn from home. A big proportion of the workforce has been forced to work at a distance, and millions of adults are unemployed or underemployed, with few opportunities to enrol in any kind of learning, education or training to reskill or upskill. Governments and public authorities, together with adult learning providers, have formulated crisis-responses and implemented plans to continue adult learning. A **quick, flexible and appropriate policy response** to the situation will have a major impact on countries' recovery, and on their resilience in the face of unpredictable future situations. This section outlines the four main response patterns that can be distinguished.

3.3.1. Providing financial support to the sector and adult learners

Adult learning providers and adult educators – particularly, freelancers, have seen an unprecedented drop in their income as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. Adult learners have also faced financial difficulties due to job loss or reduced working time. In some countries, **financial arrangements have been made to support the adult learning sector**. Measures vary and include:

- online courses being made freely available,
- online platforms receiving more government support,
- online data used for educational purposes not being charged,
- increasing the overall budget for job-related adult learning in 2020 and following years (like in **Sweden**).

The box below provides examples of responses related to the financial challenges facing the adult learning sector as a result of COVID-19.

Box 13 RESPONSES RELATED TO THE FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

In **Ireland**, SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority, is involved in **multi-stakeholder working groups** that have been established to coordinate and communicate the response to COVID-19. Further education and training provision (through Education and Training Boards) continuity is maintained where possible, and SOLAS is identifying and communicating with those affected. It is also working on options for the continuity of learning and amending and adapting assessment methods, as required. Despite challenges, good practices can be seen that relate to:

- offering support to learners and staff transitioning to remote learning and working
- providing online resources and training supports for staff
- offering professional development online for staff
- supporting peer group communications
- developing online courses for business on remote working and infection prevention and control
- making online courses (eCollege) temporarily available free of charge.⁴⁰

In **Denmark**, the government offers different **financial support schemes to businesses and employers**, covering a large part of their losses due to the lockdown. Employers are encouraged to use the time to upskill employees instead of firing them with employers able to apply for the full coverage of expenses of this.

In **Germany**, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has increased the funding of its **online learning portal**, in development since 2014⁴¹. The aim is to encounter the rising demand for online learning and to provide more online tutoring for learners on the portal.

In **Hungary**, mobile internet providers agreed not to count and charge for data generated through the use of educational portals.

In **Malta**, the Malta Enterprise Corporation⁴² in conjunction with the Malta Council of Technology designed a **EUR 5.3 million COVID Research and Development fund** to help public academic and private entities. This was based on the initiative and support of the Maltese Ministry for the Economy, Investment and Small Businesses, and the Ministry for Finance and Financial Services. The Malta Tourism Authority also launched a EUR 5 million investment in the tourism industry, consisting of funding online training to upskill people working on the tourism and hospitality industry. The aim of this investment in human resources is to prepare the sector for the post-COVID phase.

In **Latvia**, the Employment Committee (representing three ministries: Economics, Employment and Education) established the **Emergency Situation work group**, which developed a Common

⁴⁰ See: <http://www.ecollege.ie/>

⁴¹ www.vhs-lernportal.de

⁴² <https://covid19.maltaenterprise.com/covid-19-rd-fund/>

Plan of measures to provide adult education during and after the COVID-19 crisis, through distance learning opportunities. This involved looking at all distance learning opportunities available from the Ministry of Education and Science and those funded through ESF. An **extra call was also launched for ESF projects** providing adult distance learning for employees during the COVID-19 situation. Adult education institutions applied to provide in-service training programmes and parts of qualifications - modules or module groups - of modular CVET programmes to provide short distance learning programmes in adult education. 28 applications were received to provide 391 distance learning programmes, with plans to start these short distance learning programmes for adults at the end of July. This experience will be used to implement distance learning in adult education after COVID-19, to promote ICT skills and tools in adult education, and to improve the sector's ability to react to an emergency.

In **the Netherlands**, the **'Count on Skills' subsidy**, for which employers can apply and for which EUR 2.9 million has been reserved this year, is going to be opened for another round on 1 May 2020 (with a possible second round in September, if due to the COVID-19 situation only a limited number of organisations apply)⁴³.

In **France**, the Ministry of Labour helped **private training providers** who could receive partial unemployment benefits for their employees. Information on training resources is in an accessible database (**'Carif OREF'**) available to any training provider. Finally, many training producers offered their products for free for one to three months during the crisis.

The **Swiss** government supported adult learning providers experiencing a loss of income by providing liquidity through **interest-free credit**, and widening eligibility criteria for partial unemployment benefits. These measures support providers and the economy in general during the crisis. However, they do not solve all issues, with deficits still becoming too high. The umbrella organisation of adult learning and qualification body for practitioners, SVEB, has as a result called the government to react with a) emergency funding programme to boost the decreasing demand for adult learning and b) a programme to support digitalisation of the sector. The government is currently processing the request. SVEB has developed a FAQ document for providers and is organising crash-courses on digital learning for practitioners. In view of a possible reopening of schools and training centres, security concepts are being developed.

There are also policy initiatives to support the **education sector as a whole**, which also positively benefit the adult learning sector. In **Denmark**, a temporary COVID-19 legislation has been implemented which gives educational institutions **extended flexibility** in terms of number of lessons, participant registration, and alternative types of teaching (e.g. working with cases, film clips, small assignments carried out at home etc.). Additionally, adult education providers are obliged to offer learners with insufficient basic skills the needed support (reading text aloud, help with spelling, IT support etc.) as much as possible. It is still too early to determine the teaching quality and level of satisfaction among learners with the teaching they received. However, an evaluation will be carried out later this year.

The **Norwegian** government has launched several initiatives known as **"Krisepakker" (Crisis packages)** to meet the challenges and consequences of COVID-19 in the society. An important part of this is **"Kompetansepakken" (the Competences package)**. This package consists of 260 million NOK (23.9 million EUR) of extra funding, aimed at upskilling for people who have become unemployed or are temporarily laid off due to the ongoing crisis (see box below). Furthermore, laws and regulations concerning unemployment benefits, both for ordinary unemployment and temporary lay-off, have been changed to make it possible to continue studying while receiving such a benefit.

⁴³ See: <http://www.telmeemettaal.nl/subsidie/werkgevers/>

To receive this benefit, applicants must have been disqualified for a stipend/loan from the Norwegian State Education Loan Fund in the period in which they were terminated. This is a temporary solution in place from 20 April to 31 August 2020. In addition, students who can prove lost income due to the COVID-19 crisis can apply for an extra loan for up to 26,000 NOK (2,400 EUR), of which 8,000 NOK (740 EUR) may be eligible for conversion into a grant at a later point. This regulation is still being adopted in the Ministry of Education and Research and has not been implemented yet.

Box 14 NORWEGIAN KOMPETANSEPAKKEN (THE COMPETENCES PACKAGE)

Kompetansepakken has four main components:

- **120 million NOK** (11million EUR) is allocated to the further development of sectoral programmes (Bransjeprogrammet);
- **100 million NOK** (9.2 million EUR) is allocated to digitised learning. Educational institutions can apply for financial support to develop digital courses for adults who are unemployed or temporarily laid off.
- **20 million NOK** (1.8 million EUR) is allocated to universities and university colleges to increase their capacity, allowing more students to enrol.
- **20 million NOK** (1.8 million EUR) is allocated to vocational education and training for unskilled workers through a programme directed at adults (Fagoppl ring i Kompetansepluss arbeid). Through this programme, workers are supported in obtaining a formal VET certificate.

In **France**, the government and companies have been **facilitating training for short-time workers** during the COVID-19 situation. 500 million EUR has been made available to cover the educational costs of those workers under the special short-time work arrangement fund. In the event of prolonged under-activity, or even total cessation of activity, companies may apply to benefit from a training scheme, instead of partial activity, in order to invest in the skills of its employees to prepare them to face transformations resulting from economic and technological changes, and to help them adapt to new jobs. The training systems that can be used include the skills development plan and the Personal training account (CPF) implemented during working hours. As of 15th June 2020, 12,019 companies had concluded training agreements to train 70,245 employees for a total amount of more than 52 million EUR.

An example of a **quick re-skilling initiative** can be found in **Sweden**, where the ‘Skill Shift Initiative’ (SE: Beredskapslyftet) aims at the mobilisation of available human resources to support Swedish healthcare providers in tackling the COVID-19 outbreak.⁴⁴ It started as a fast track training for laid-off SAS cabin crew, but expanded to other companies quickly. The three-day training includes digital studies and a practical internship and offers a certificate when completed. The initiative is supported financially by the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation.

3.3.2. Solving the lack of equipment by mixing methods

The various funding solutions described above are partly used to solve challenges related to ‘getting organised online’ and to equipment and infrastructure issues, as experienced by education providers. When it comes to dealing with the lack of equipment and infrastructure experienced by adult learners, providers and adult educators have been doing this through **‘quick-fix’ solutions such as**

⁴⁴ <https://www.beredskapslyftet.se/english>

combining different media, such as telephone, postal services, email and even TV to reach their learners, as illustrated in the box below..

Box 15 SOLUTIONS TO THE LACK OF EQUIPMENT

In **Italy**, in the area of prison education, the vast majority of teachers adopted video-recorded materials or expressly commissioned TV channels to air educational classes⁴⁵.

In **Germany**, to overcome the challenge of participants not having equipment, tutors send the exercises by mail (printed) and get the results back by a smartphone-photo, or discuss the printed text with learners and send exercises for completion via phone.

In **Spain**, as a priority, from different instances of the central and regional educational administrations, especially from the MEVET (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training), instructions have been issued to provide an organized pedagogical response which assures the continuity of the educational process in a distance and online modality, whenever possible. All adult learners can use available televised resources and educational programmes. Collaboration agreements with Spanish TV have also been set up, with the education programme “We learn together” a good example.

These ‘quick-fixes’ are effective, as they have been able to solve challenges rapidly. However, they might not be sustainable as adequate education tools in the long-run.

3.3.3. Providing information and making the adult learning offer more transparent

The dissemination of factual **information and instructions on how to deal with the COVID-19 situation** is important, especially when it comes to reaching out to people with limited basic skills. Providing information on available adult learning courses and **making the course offer in the country more transparent**, has thus been a key part of countries’ response to the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector. Examples are included in the box below.

Box 16 PROVIDING INFORMATION ON AVAILABLE LEARNING OFFERS

In **Germany**, to inform people with low literacy skills about COVID-19, the Federal Ministry for Education and Research provides a homepage with information in “simple German”⁴⁶ on: updated policy news, consequences with regard to work, information for families and available learning opportunities.

In **Estonia**, a dedicated web page for all online training in the country has been created, as a common public, private and third sector initiative, with hundreds of different kinds of e-learning courses published by training providers. Furthermore, various Facebook groups have been set up, offering support to those in need. A good example is the “Smart Help for the Elderly” group, which aims to create a virtual community where the digital competences of the elderly can be supported.

In the **Netherlands**, the Dutch Reading and Writing Foundation has published a COVID-19 information kit, which provides information about the virus and the national health regulations in short, plain text and animations.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See for instance: <https://www.epea.org/bologna-italy-use-of-local-tv-in-prison-education/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.mein-schlüssel-zur-welt.de/de/informationen-zum-corona-virus-1790.html>

⁴⁷ <https://www.lezenenschrijven.nl/wat-wij-doen/corona-in-begrijpelijke-taal>

3.3.4. Support adult educators and providers through making available assistance, learning materials and online training for educators

All providers and adult educators were confronted with a sudden lockdown and had to organise their learning from home. Providers put in substantial effort to make this happen, and governments provided additional support in getting organised online. This was done by:

- providing access to online learning materials,
- making online learning platforms available,
- providing guidelines on how to get organised from home,
- providing didactical instructions on how to use online learning tools,
- and most importantly, by providing capacity building opportunities for adult educators so that they have the skills to operate in an online environment. EPALE was also used for this purpose.

The box below provides some country examples.

Box 17 SUPPORT PROVIDED TO GET ADULT LEARNING PROVIDERS ORGANISED ONLINE

In **Croatia**, while work-based learning was interrupted, the content posted on the website of the Agency for Vocational Education and Adult Education includes videos aimed at acquiring vocational skills. In addition to the materials available, teachers and mentors were encouraged to complement online teaching materials, in particular materials for work-based learning. The Ministry of Science and Education also provided recommendations on how to evaluate learning outcomes in an online environment. The Agency adapted the recommendations for adult education institutions and helped the institutions to start this process so that students could complete their programmes (with the exception of those who had to demonstrate practical skills).

In **Hungary**, on the home page of the Educational Authority, methodological guidelines are provided for teachers on how to use different online community channels (YouTube, Facebook) and how to create and upload short videos and tutorials. There are also links to books, educational videos and methods for self-evaluation and assessment.

In the **Netherlands**, the government provided guidelines on how to deal with the closure of schools as a result of COVID-19 regulation. These guidelines, which are regularly updated, are written in close cooperation with representatives of education providers, including providers of adult learning.⁴⁸ Umbrella organisations related to adult learning also provided inspiring good practices and guidelines.⁴⁹

In **Spain**, to complement the response of Adult Education Centres, initiatives such as the following have been launched: 1) making available didactic materials and resources of CIDEAD (the Integrated Centre for Distance Learning, of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training); 2) open online training courses available to adults through the Aula Mentor programme that provides non-formal offer courses many of which are focussed on the improvement of key competences.

In **Slovenia**, The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MESS) and the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE – an umbrella institution for development of AL) prepared a circular letter with recommendations to all education providers on how to organise their work from home and

⁴⁸ See the latest version of the guidelines here: <https://www.mбораad.nl/publicaties/servicedocument-30-aanpak-corona-mbo>

⁴⁹ See for instance: <https://www.nrto.nl/initiatieven-vanuit-branches/>; <https://www.nrto.nl/voorbeelden-van-opleidingstrajecten/>; <https://www.hetbegintmettaal.nl/nieuws/corona-tips-voor-taalcoaching/>; <https://mbo.lesopafstand.nl/>.

digitally. SIAE has the role of national coordinator of many types of AL (literacy programmes for low-qualified employees (and other target groups), self-directed learning, study circles, project learning for young adults (NEETs), and other non-formal AL) and in providing guidance, information and awareness-raising.

The **Czech** EPAL platform has launched the Online Academy for Adult Educators - a series of online webinars and other activities for adult educators. The target group is lecturers, trainer managers and other staff in the adult education sector. The informal academy aims to improve the teaching quality of adult educators that have been left without work due to the crisis, to allow them to be better prepared for the post-COVID period.

In **Estonia**, EPAL is the place for gathering, translating and delivering research, case studies, communities of practice, webinars, and providing different e-learning resources. As a response to the COVID-19 crisis, EPAL National Support Service initiated a study of adult educators' competences as demonstrated in online training during the crisis. The aim is to identify adult educators' training needs. Results of the research will be used in training provision for adult educators and can be used for the development of a competency profile (occupational qualification standard) of the adult educator who has suddenly become an instructional designer.

In **Latvia**, during the COVID-19 situation, the EPAL National Support Service of Latvia specifically developed online webinars and, for the first time, online seminars, which were very well attended. The following content was shared: distance learning resources, digital tools, good practice stories, expert opinion articles on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on adult education. The EPAL NSS also created a new e-mail news sending system.

In **Belgium (BE-FR)**: The *learning resource centre* (Centre de Ressources Pédagogiques - CRP) is a recent service of the French Community of Belgium. One of its objectives is to support the production and use of techno-pedagogical resources by teachers of formal adult education. The CRP's collaborative platform enables schools to provide hybrid teaching without having to deal with technical difficulties. In parallel with the development of dynamic teaching modules aimed at primary and secondary school students as well as adults during their lifelong learning, the CRP is pooling together all relevant content and good practices within the French Community. To this end, the CRP's team of practitioner-experts organise informative meetings in each province of the French Community with adult education actors. The latter also benefit from the CRP's techno pedagogical support within the framework of the "Digital School" projects. During the COVID-19 situation, the CRP also developed several digital trainings, including for VET, continued providing online help to adult teachers and designed and delivered online training programmes. A partnership system called *FormaForm* has also been set up by public training institutions to pool resources and strengthen organisations through the development of a common training offer. They offer those involved in non-formal training and professional integration, tailor-made and innovative services to develop their skills for the benefit of their respective audiences by pooling resources and expertise.

In **Ireland**, professional development courses were made available online to relevant Education and Training Board (ETB) staff in various areas. For ETB Managers, a Leading Others module, which forms part of a Change Management programme, was rolled out online in April. A number of online pilots in Quality Assurance and facilitated online sessions in Stakeholder Management to support staff who engage directly with enterprise were also rolled out.

3.4. Concluding remarks: challenges persist

This section provides some concluding remarks on how countries deal with the COVID-19 situation in the adult learning sector.

3.4.1. The importance of basic skills, particularly language, digital and critical thinking skills

The challenges brought on by the COVID-19 crisis, and the responses of the education sector ultimately show that in times of crisis, **people turn to their own resources**: their family, local community and vital services such as health care, transportation, mail service etc. This requires a **sufficient level of basic skills**, that allow people to cope with a crisis situation and try to continue living, working and caring as well as possible. As a result, people lacking digital skills, literacy skills or critical thinking skills have been in a precarious situation during the COVID-19 crisis.

3.4.2. A steep learning curve for both adult learners and providers and a sense of solidarity

New adult learning provisions and learning needs are emerging as a result of the crisis. It is clear that digital literacy skills need to be taught and re-taught, both to adult learners and adult educators. In general, despite challenges, countries report positively on the pace of learning development of adult educators and providers and the pace of adaptation to new ways of organising learning. All countries recognise that **digital skills are essential for adult learning professionals**. As indicated in **Estonia**, for example, what seemed impossible before, has now become an immediate reality. Furthermore, the crisis has shown that **adult learners are more capable of using blended and online modes of learning** than expected by adult educators. The COVID-19 crisis might have opened an appetite for learning online, especially for adults that are ashamed to admit that they have a digital skills deficit. The impersonal mode of delivery of online learning allows them to work on their skills deficit without stepping over the threshold of an adult learning provider.

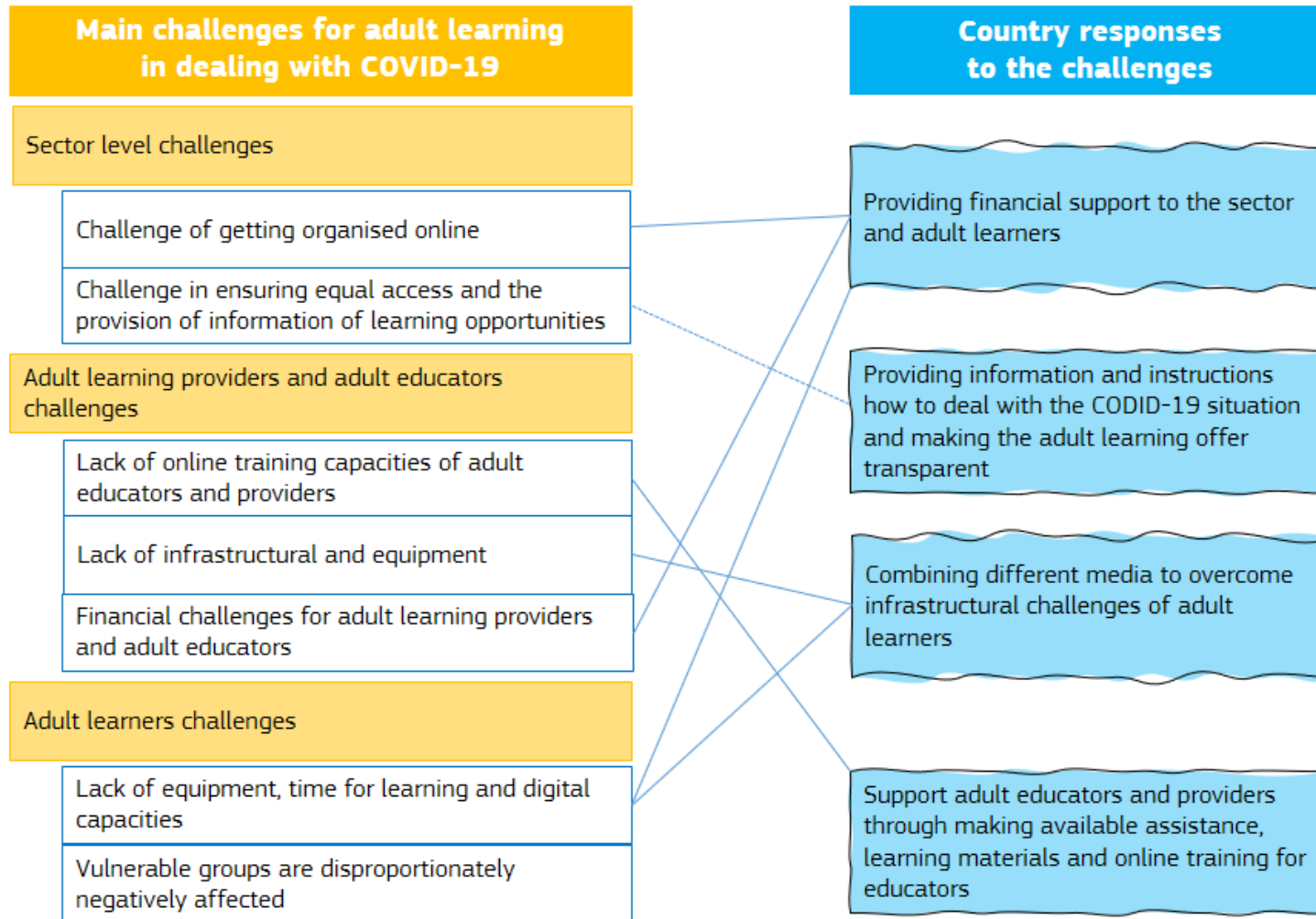
What is also noticeable (for instance, in **Croatia**) is the **solidarity among the teaching community** that has emerged throughout the crisis. The community has connected through social networks, distributing teaching materials and resources so that learners can achieve their educational outcomes as successfully as possible.

3.4.3. Immediate responses to many of the emerging challenges

The picture emerging from the country responses is that the adult learning sector shows a **high level of resilience and adaptability**. Despite a lack of equipment, infrastructure, funding and training, adult learning providers and adult educators were able to get organised quickly and provide online learning opportunities. Government responses have focused on providing financial support, making learning materials available and supporting adult educators to improve their skills in online adult learning design and delivery.

The following figure provides an overview of the main challenges faced by the sector as a whole, the adult learning providers and the learners themselves. It relates the challenges to specific country responses. The red-shaded challenges are those that have not received adequate responses.

FIGURE 3.1: MAIN CHALLENGES AND COUNTRY RESPONSES IN ADULT LEARNING



Source: Author

3.4.4. Crisis responses do not solve the most persisting challenges: vulnerability, quality and funding

As indicated in the figure, two main interrelated challenges persist, namely **ensuring equal access** to adult learning for all and **supporting vulnerable groups** that are disproportionately negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis. These challenges are important as they relate directly to the social function and purpose of adult learning systems: *Are our adult learning systems capable of helping those who need adult learning the most?*

The COVID-19 crisis has had the most negative impact on:

- Non-formal adult learning and those sub-sectors that are the least organised and experienced in offering online learning;
- Adult educators that are hired as freelancers and rely on demand-side funding;
- Specific vulnerable groups, lacking financial means, ICT equipment, basic digital skills and those with health /mental health conditions or in prisons.

Furthermore, while adult learning providers and adult educators are applauded for their swift transition to online delivery modes during the crisis, there are concerns about **the quality of the delivery, the materials provided, and the guidance and support** offered to learners. In most cases, understandably, the online or blended delivery mode was not based on a fully-fledged instructional design and does not include sufficient quality assurance mechanisms.

Finally, COVID-19 has shown in many countries that the **adult learning sector is heavily underfunded**, resulting in inadequate capacities in the sector – both in terms of infrastructure and human resources. This has made it challenging to transition to online delivery modes whilst ensuring quality and to have the structures in place throughout this transition to support the most vulnerable.

4.

What is the role of adult learning in a COVID-19 affected world?

This chapter examines what the role of adult learning systems in a COVID-19 affected world should be, and what is needed for adult learning to be able to play this role.

4.1. The role of adult learning: maybe not so different, but gained importance

As written by Niccolò Machiavelli (and further popularised by Winston Churchill), ‘never waste the opportunity offered by a good crisis’. The current COVID-19 situation provides us with new opportunities to reflect on our existing systems, to understand the underlying problems that have come to the surface due to the COVID-19 situation and to provide solutions.

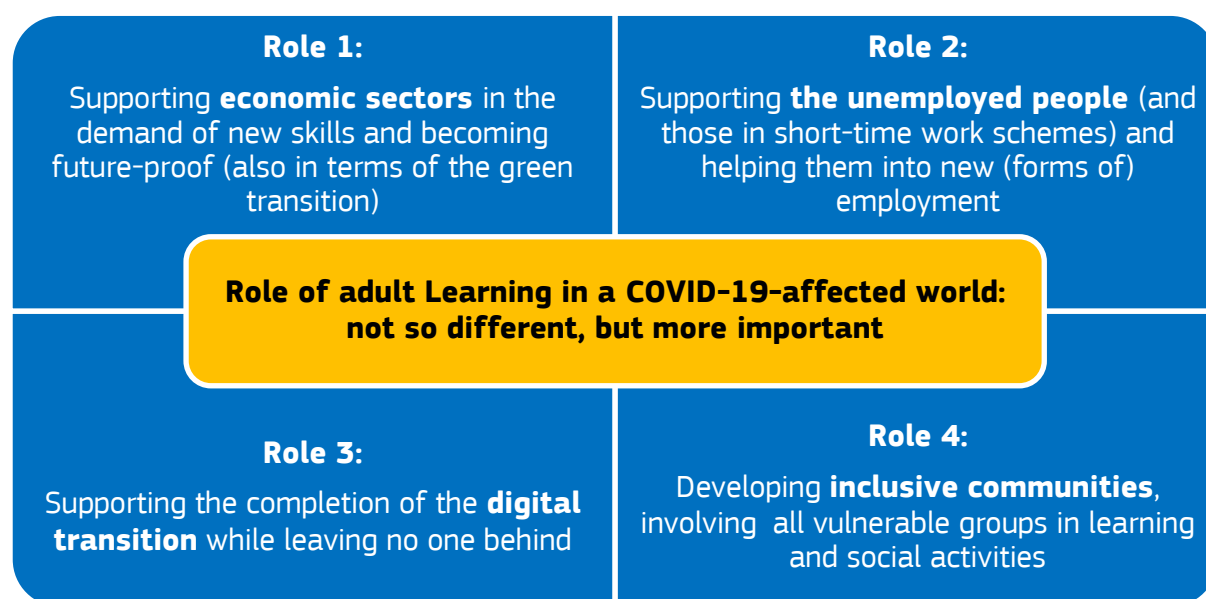
The role of adult learning in the future might not be so different from the role of adult learning envisaged before COVID-19. As expressed in the Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning, adult learning enables adults, “in particular the low-skilled and older workers – **to improve their ability to adapt to changes in the labour market and society**. Adult learning provides a means of upskilling or reskilling those affected by unemployment, restructuring and career transitions, as well as makes an important contribution to social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development.”⁵⁰ This major role of adult learning, defined in the context of the economic crisis, remains valid now. The COVID-19 situation, however, shows that despite the policy attention on adult learning in many Member States, adult learning is unable to play this major role, due in part to the fact that it remains underfunded. The COVID-19 crisis has seriously tested the capacity of countries to respond to sudden events of a widespread nature, without leaving any groups behind. Providing learning for all, from young to elderly, is an even bigger challenge in disadvantaged communities with fewer technological capacities. Adult learning will play an important part in the recovery only if adult learning systems are capable in terms of infrastructure, human capacities and funding of **ensuring equal access and reaching out to the most vulnerable in the society**.

The COVID-19 crisis and its consequences, such as a rise in unemployment and social exclusion, will continue to highlight the importance of adult learning. Those with a variety of skills and competences are and will be able to move between sectors more easily, better adapting to unexpected situations. Those without this agility in terms of skills and competences, but also in terms of financial, social, and technological resources, are and will continue to be trapped in a disadvantageous situation. To avoid this division, many adults will have to retrain and rebuild their professional skills. For society,

⁵⁰ European Council (2011), Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (2011/C 372/01)

this will be the opportunity to fill competence gaps and make our economies more sustainable. Adult learning has a key role in this process, in terms of the following:

FIGURE 4.1 ROLES OF ADULT LEARNING



Source: Author

These key contributions of adult learning systems are discussed in more detail in the following sections

4.1.1. Role 1: Supporting economic sectors in the demand of new skills, and becoming future-proof

In terms of economic sectors, it is expected, that **COVID-19 will permanently change whole sectors and business models and thus also change the skills required in the workplace.** It is still largely unknown what the exact impact on sectors will be. Some sectors have been greatly affected in the short term (such as travel, hospitality, retail) and parts of those sectors might not fully recover or will have to substantially change their way of operating, even when a vaccine is found. There are also sectors that are currently not severely hit but might see a substantial impact in the medium term: for instance logistics and technological sectors facing a future drop in demand. Finally, there are sectors that have seen an increase in demand or new opportunities in a changed economy, such as online and delivery services. While the overall impact on sectors is still not clear, it is certain that all sectors will undergo changes in how they operate and the skills they need, and that the success of companies will depend on how well they can make the transition to a COVID-19 affected economy. Furthermore, the COVID-19 situation has come at a time when the green transition is a top policy priority. We now have an opportunity to link recovery plans to making sectors greener, restructuring them in a way that allows us to achieve a green transition. Finally, this role includes as well supporting the employed (particularly those who are low skilled are a vulnerable group) to upskill and reskill.

Adult learning helps to master this transition faster by responding quickly and effectively to support sectors, organisations (companies, employers) and employees to retrain for new activities, find innovative solutions for emerging challenges and develop new skills. A large part of the adult learning needed in this context, is organised by sectors and employers, and can involve both public and private adult learning providers, offering them re-training and advice in the workplace. It includes

the organisation of **large-scale retraining for specific occupations** that are in demand quickly, for instance, the production of medical equipment, the need for additional healthcare staff, and responding to other needs of various affected industries. Also, Adult learning systems play a key role in providing relevant skills for those affected by COVID-19 underpinning their employability and access into sustainable and quality employment. Recent events only highlight that those in vulnerable sectors run the risk of being most impacted and need to be engaged in lifelong learning to reduce their vulnerabilities.

A concern, however, is that **despite the increased economic and societal need for adult learning, companies may still reduce their investments in training**, from a costs-saving perspective. With unemployment rates rising, additional demand is placed on public employment services and training providers to reach out to newly unemployed persons, to offer training to get them back into employment. This obviously also leads to increased pressure on national budgets, that may not be able to adequately support adult learning, despite the clear need to do so.

4.1.2. Role 2: Supporting the unemployed people and those in short-time work schemes and helping them into new (forms of) employment

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, there are both sectors where a large number of people are losing their jobs, as well as sectors where additional manpower is urgently needed. There will also be more young people looking for a job, including recent graduates from VET and higher education. The people working in or who have just been trained to enter the sectors that have been hit hardest by the crisis might need to retrain. This will likely be one of the groups the government will specifically target to support. This **does not only involve learning new occupational skills, but also guiding unemployed people towards a new future**, identifying new opportunities and reducing the feeling of being trapped in a disadvantageous situation.

Adult learning plays a crucial role in preparing unemployed people to re-integrate into a changed labour market. This does not only involve training them in different occupational skills, but also supporting unemployed people to find a job in this new environment through, for example, assessing their skills profile, providing more training on online presentation and job interviews, and supporting the **development of transversal skills** such as basic skills – including basic digital skills – and critical thinking.

4.1.3. Role 3: Supporting the completion of the digital transition, while leaving no one behind

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the megatrend of automation impacted how work was organised. The COVID-19 situation accelerated the processes of digitalisation even further. While before the crisis, shifting work and services from offline to online was a question of efficiency and offering services, now, shifting to online has become a question of health and safety as well: **what can be done online, should be done online**. This poses challenges for organisations that need to make this transition, and even more so for citizens that lack the basic skills to make use of online services.

Adult learning plays an important role in ensuring that organisations have the skills to make the transition to online services and that all citizens have the basic skills needed to make use of online services. This requires **additional training in basic digital skills, but also in more advanced skills** so that digital and online tools can replace offline services to the extent possible.

4.1.4. Role 4: Developing inclusive communities, involving all vulnerable groups in learning and social activities

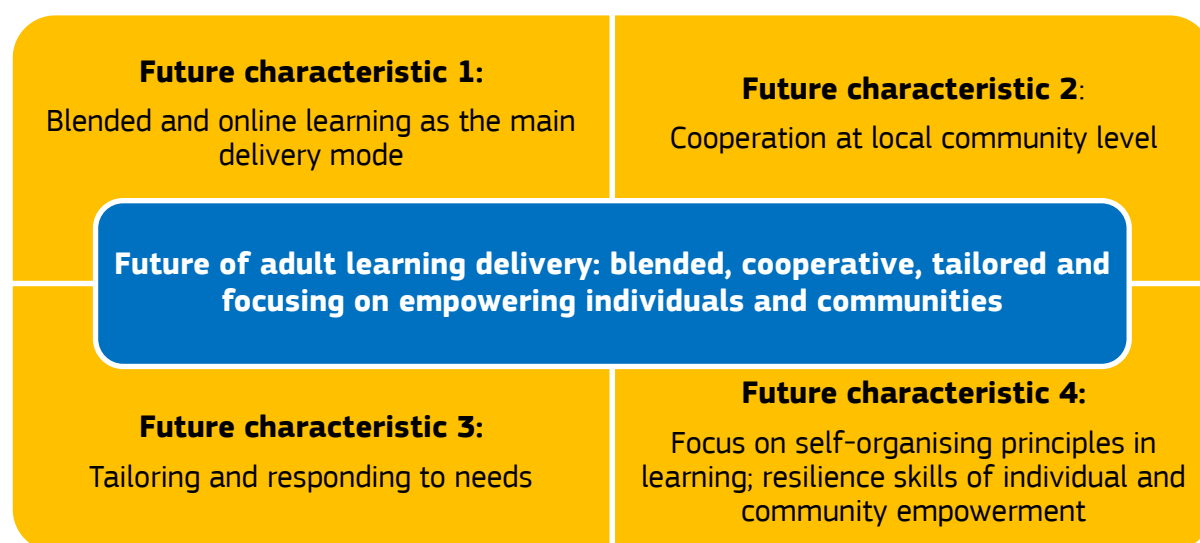
The fourth role of adult learning is at the core of adult learning systems, as it relates to ensuring the inclusiveness of society and the economy. The COVID-19 situation is testing the resilience of us all, but is particularly increasing the vulnerability of citizens that were already in a vulnerable situation before the crisis. Those in a state of social isolation, unemployed, with health-related issues, lacking a social safety net, or lacking specific occupational or basic skills have been particularly impacted. The crisis is teaching us that **those who are in more disadvantageous social and economic positions are hit harder than others, and also have fewer means and less support at their disposal to get out of their vulnerable position.** Current adult learning systems - whose limited budgets were stretched already before the crisis – are often not fully able to offer a solution.

Adult learning systems in this context must not only be a provider of skills, but **must also support the resilience, autonomy and self-reliance of individuals and their local communities and families.** It is certainly time to reinforce upskilling pathways for those people furthest from learning opportunities. While there are specific vulnerable groups that deserve specific attention - such as the low-qualified, those with low (digital) skills, older adults, migrants and asylum seekers, unemployed people of all ages, Roma, people with disabilities, parents – **this role for adult learning systems applies to all citizens.** No one is exempt from the adverse effects of the COVID-19 crisis which may need individuals to rely on their own agility, basic skills and local community support.

4.2. Future of adult learning delivery: blended, cooperative, tailored and focusing on empowering individuals and communities

All sections of society need the recovery to regain some form of normality, and this requires a clear strategy for developing and using people’s competences. This might lead to reforms of education and training systems to deliver lifelong learning opportunities to all, and to support individuals and companies to be stronger than before the crisis. To be able to play their part, **adult learning systems need to show a number of future-oriented characteristics** which are described in the section below (see figure).

FIGURE 4.2 FUTURE CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNING



Source: Author

4.2.1. Future characteristic 1: Blended and online learning as the main delivery mode

It is generally believed that while restriction measures may relax in the future, without a vaccine, the need to maintain social distancing measures will remain, in order to minimise risks of large infection waves. **Adult learning systems, therefore, will have to be reformed to offer their training more through blended and online delivery modes** as opposed to face-to-face environments, while at the same time emphasising the importance of face-to-face learning and ensuring a blended or online delivery of high quality.

In terms of modes of delivery, the crisis is showing that the adult learning sector is **more capable than previously thought of organising learning online** and facilitating the online acquisition of skills, including digital skills. The crisis, in this sense, has digitally matured the sector. As countries reopen services after lockdown some courses could probably be organised through some form of face-to-face delivery. However, to ensure continuity of learning, **the future of adult learning is in blended and online learning**. This will be facilitated by the fact that learners have – out of necessity – become more familiar with digital learning environments throughout the crisis, and are more willing to learn through this delivery mode. Learners' fear of facing technical issues or not having adequate digital skills while participating in online learning has somewhat subsided. The online mode of delivery has also come with certain benefits: people living in remote areas or who face challenges travelling for educational activities have been able to more easily access courses that previously were held in a classroom. Nevertheless, **there is still a lot to be done in the adult learning sector to remove all barriers to online learning for all learners and ensure equal access**. This move to online provision also contributes to greater tailoring of provision to individual learning needs.

Adult learning systems will have to find ways to improve the quality of online and blended learning, which will require **delivery to be underpinned by a solid instructional design** in which adult learners are motivated, encouraged, and guided. The design should also include trustworthy assessments and evaluation of learning and an effective outreach strategy to reach those who need learning the most. Furthermore, learners' access to online services will have to be secured through provision of equipment and internet access. This obviously affects not only how adult learning providers are organised, but also the **skills and competences required within the organisations and by the adult educators** themselves.

4.2.2. Future characteristic 2: Cooperation and getting organised at local community level

It is important that adult learning develops further as a sector in its own right, in which different types of organisations, public, private, formal, and non-formal play their part. For the sector to become a social pillar in a COVID-19 affected world, collaboration is key. **Different actors will have to work together**, acknowledging each other's contribution to supporting the adult population in their learning for work, inclusion in society, personal development and well-being. For this reason, partnership and cooperation *within* the adult learning sector should be expanded.

Part of this involves ensuring that adult learning systems are **closely linked to local communities**. At community level, a social infrastructure should be in place that can support people in a specific vulnerable group (with health issues, unemployed, with a lack of skills etc.). Adult learning providers should closely link up with *external* local partners such as primary and secondary schools,

municipalities, community services (health services, in particular) and other key stakeholders directly engaging with communities. This will build the social infrastructure for skills and competence development at the community level. **Cooperation and collaboration with labour market stakeholders** should also be expanded, such as employers, employers' associations, trade unions and public employment services. For example, employers can play an important role in advising on education and training provision in future developments and trends, including accelerated digital adoption, business product and service remodelling.

Adult learning systems will have to find ways to further improve cooperation between public, private, formal, non-formal providers and between adult learning providers, companies, municipalities, formal schools and other services (e.g. libraries). This calls for better **overall transparency** and oversight of the adult learning sector to ensure that no one is lagging behind on essential skills development.

4.2.3. Future characteristic 3: Tailoring and responding to needs

As the shifts in economic activity take hold in a COVID-19 affected world, people will increasingly have to be **upskilled in their occupation or retrained for new sectors** and occupations. However, many adults will already have valuable skills and competences gained from previous experience. They might also face a variety of challenges related to specific skills deficits, but that have a much wider personal and community impact (health issues, work-related issues, housing issues, etc.).

In this context, there is an **increased need for any adult learning provision to assess what skills people already have, what new skills they have to learn, and even which existing skills they have to 'unlearn'**. This will determine the support they need to improve their position in society and the labour market. This requires adult learning systems to be able to understand the skills demand of sectors and of individual employers in the short and longer term, so that they can anticipate these better. Adult learning systems will have to find ways **to better tailor and sustain provision to the specific skills needs** of individuals as well as of the labour market. Here, skills forecasting methods will be needed, but a focus on improving (online) counselling and guidance provision for the individual is also warranted. This should be holistic, taking into account the whole person and the situation they are in.

4.2.4. Future characteristic 4: Focus on self-organising principles in learning; resilience skills of individual and community empowerment

The COVID-19 situation forced people to turn to their own resilience and resources - firstly relying on their own skills and competences and the close social circle around them, and secondly, on existing social services. In a COVID-19 affected future, **all people need to be empowered with at least the basic skills needed to self-organise and self-manage** so as to be able to cope with emerging challenges.

Adult learning systems will need, therefore, to facilitate this empowerment through **supporting individualised approaches to learning, as well as outreach to specific groups** based on an examination of dispositional, situational barriers to learning, employment and social inclusion and the potential of individuals. Adult learning systems will need to work with community ambassadors and/or different institutions and organisations active on the local level. They will also need to **consider offering direct financial support** for people to engage in learning (through individual learning accounts for instance), accompanied by support measures such as information provision on adult learning offerings and guidance.

5.

Conclusions and considerations for the future

This chapter will highlight the main insights from the previous chapters and will discuss what needs to be considered for adult learning systems to effectively contribute to the future recovery from the COVID-19 situation.

5.1. Conclusions on the role of adult learning in a COVID-19 affected world

In this report, the main impact areas of COVID-19 at macro and micro level and how adult learning provision is affected by the crisis have been briefly discussed. Based on inputs from Member States, the report has outlined sector responses to the crisis. It has explored the role adult learning can play in a COVID-19 affected world, and the key elements needed to make adult learning systems future-proof. The conclusions of this report can be summarised as follows:

- 1) COVID-19 affected all economic sectors and society as a whole. However, **vulnerable groups** have been impacted the most, thus accentuating social inequalities.
- 2) The crisis and resultant lockdowns highlighted the **importance of basic skills** – both literacy and digital skills – as well as key competences such as critical thinking and learning to learn skills. These were critical in supporting individuals to deal with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis. The crisis also showed that individuals and communities should have a minimum level of self-sufficiency.
- 3) For the adult learning sector, the **impact of the crisis has been immense**. Dealing with the lockdowns has posed challenges associated with getting organised to provide services online in a very short time, reaching out to adult learners, and ensuring that adult educators have the right skills and equipment to continue providing learning opportunities online. Overall, the adult learning sector has largely **managed to respond quickly and effectively** to these challenges, making a swift transition into online delivery.
- 4) The immediate responses from the adult learning sector show a **weakness in its ability to reach those that require most attention** i.e. specific vulnerable groups. In the longer term, there is also a need to substantially improve the quality of online and blended delivery and increase the financial resources for the sector.
- 5) The COVID-19 situation has seriously tested the capacity of all countries to respond to sudden events of such a widespread nature without leaving any groups behind. Providing learning for all (from the young to the elderly) is an even bigger challenge in disadvantaged communities with less technological capacities. For adult learning to play an important part in the recovery from the crisis, adult learning systems must be capable, in terms of infrastructure, human

capacities and funding, of **ensuring equal access and reaching out to the most vulnerable** in the society.

- 6) In a COVID-19 affected future, adult learning systems have an important role to play in terms of:
- a. Supporting **economic sectors** in the demand of new skills and becoming future-proof (also for the green transition);
 - b. Supporting **the unemployed** people and those in short-time work schemes and helping them into new (forms of) employment;
 - c. Supporting the **completion of the digital transition** while leaving no one behind;
 - d. Developing **inclusive communities**, involving all vulnerable groups in learning and social activities.
- 7) The role of adult learning in the future is similar to the role of adult learning envisaged today on the EU level. Now, however, more than ever, having a quality adult learning sector can mean the difference between a smooth and a rough recovery in a COVID-19 affected future. A quality adult learning sector means that all parts of the sector – formal education, adult continuing education and retraining, non-formal and informal learning – in the community and in other settings need to be strengthened. **The recovery process is an opportunity for the different parts of the sector to work closely together**, making best use of resources in order to serve the individual learning needs of all adults. Collaboration on the following key areas will be key:
- a. **Blended and online learning as the main delivery mode:** Adult learning systems will have to find ways to improve the quality of online and blended learning. Delivery should be underpinned by a solid instructional design, in which adult learners are motivated, encouraged, and guided. Trustworthy assessments and evaluation of learning should be in place, and effective outreach to those who need learning the most must be undertaken. Adult learning systems will also have to find a way to organise the essential face-to-face aspects of learning in a manner that allows them to continue under restrictions, or which allows for quick transition to online modes. Furthermore, all learners' access to online services will have to be secured through provision of equipment and internet access. This obviously affects not only how adult learning providers are organised, but also has implications on the skills and competences required within the organisations, and by the adult educators as well.
 - b. **Cooperation and getting organised at local community level:** Adult learning systems will have to find ways to further improve cooperation between public, private, formal, and non-formal providers and also between adult learning providers, companies, municipalities, formal schools and other services (e.g. libraries). This calls for better overall transparency and oversight of adult learning taking place to ensure that no one is lagging behind on essential skills development.
 - c. **Tailoring and responding to individual and labour market needs:** Adult learning systems will have to find ways to better tailor the learning provision to the specific skills needs of individuals and of the labour market. This will require making use of skills forecasting methods, but also improved (online) counselling and guidance provision, taking into account the whole person and the situation they are in.

- d. **Focus on self-organising principles in learning, resilience skills of individuals and on community empowerment:** Adult learning systems must facilitate people's empowerment by supporting individualised approaches and outreach to specific groups, looking at dispositional, situational barriers to learning, employment and social inclusion and the potential of individuals. Working with community ambassadors and/or different local institutions and organisations will be key in this. Forms of direct financial support for people to engage in learning (through individual learning accounts for instance) may also be necessary, supported by accompanying measures such as information provision on adult learning offers and guidance.
- 8) All in all, effective adult learning systems are essential to secure an equal, just and inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and to facilitate the manifold transitions that people face, in their work, social and personal lives. This requires **substantial changes in how adult learning systems are organised, coordinated, and financed** and in how providers design and offer their learning, and reach out to vulnerable groups.

5.2. Considerations on what is needed for adult learning to fulfil its essential role

To ensure that adult learning systems can fulfil this essential role in the recovery, several actions need to be considered in different areas and at different levels. These are discussed below, focussing on what may need to happen at national and European level.

1) Developing a national adult learning sector-wide strategy

At national level, consideration should be given to developing a national adult learning sector-wide pluriennial strategy, in the context of a wider national lifelong learning or skills strategy), to better enable adult learning to support the functioning of society and the economy in a COVID-19 affected future. This sector-wide approach should ensure cooperation between all relevant actors, secure effective skills intelligence, tailor learning to needs, and ensure effective outreach to all. This national strategy should take the following key aspects into consideration:

- **Supporting adult learning providers in making the transition to more high quality blended and online learning:** The transition into blended and online learning for many providers was done on a rather ad hoc basis and lacks a systematic and sustainable approach that is able to deliver quality adult learning in the future. Adult learning providers need support in terms of equipment, software, and expertise on how to organise adult learning online or in a blended way. Furthermore, national governments could support the improvement of internet access in their countries, especially in terms of connectivity in rural areas and ensuring that all households have access to devices which give them access to internet services.
- **Providing adult educators with further training in online delivery and instructional design in online environments:** Here as well, adult educators made a quick transition with a steep learning curve during the crisis. However, for sustainable impact, educators need more training in developing quality adult learning content suitable for delivery in an online or blended manner.
- **Ensuring the sector can support the development of individual and community empowerment and self-sufficiency:** Adult learning provision should empower individuals

and communities to be able to face transitions. Ensuring that individuals have the financial and material resources for learning, have access to guidance support, and a quality adult learning offer, can support the take-up of learning and help individuals and communities become more resilient.

- **Cross-sectoral collaboration to reach out to all, especially vulnerable groups:** As a social safety net, adult learning systems have shown weaknesses in reaching all people. These can only be resolved through working together as a sector and using the networks of all the providers and stakeholders involved. Working together to reach out to vulnerable groups and working with local communities and ambassadors to improve outreach is key.
- **Improving the transparency of the (online) offer:** As the adult learning offer shifts increasingly towards online delivery, adult learners, especially those from vulnerable groups, need support to find which course is right for them. This requires improving the transparency of the learning offer, providing information on learning opportunities in a tailored way to specific target groups, as well as providing assistance in selecting courses.
- **Improving guidance and counselling services for learning, career and life:** Adult learning does not happen in isolation: the challenges adults encounter in their career and in life are likely to interfere with their learning. Adult learning guidance systems should strengthen their holistic approaches to enable them to support adults to deal with the range of challenges they face.
- **Supporting more online learning assessments:** Delivering adult learning online may be relatively straightforward to do, but conducting the learning assessment online poses greater challenges. The sector should set quality criteria and/or standards that can support online learning assessments, while complying with data protection and privacy regulations.
- **Making use of skills intelligence to tailor the learning offer:** Skills demands can change rapidly in the coming years, with many sectors set to undergo a substantial transformation in a COVID-19 affected world. Understanding the evolving skills needs of the labour market is essential to tailor the adult learning provision, both in terms of content and mode of delivery.
- **Ensuring the sector is funded to deliver:** This national sector wide strategy should be accompanied by sufficient budget for adult learning providers to get organised online and for the sector to work on the key aspects outlined above, together with the government and key stakeholders, such as social partners, companies, NGOs and municipalities. National and European funding opportunities need to be explored, such as Member States' commitments in the context of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and future EU programmes, such as ESF Plus and Erasmus Plus.

2) Continuing and renewing the adult learning policy agenda at the European level

On the EU level, there is a need for a continuation of the renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning (EAAL).⁵¹ The Agenda's priorities could be renewed in the light of the COVID-19 situation, and further linked to the novel Skills Agenda⁵². Adult learning systems are at the heart of a pursued paradigm shift which seeks to: "take advantage of the green and digital transitions and support a prompt recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, by:

⁵¹ European Council (2011), Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (2011/C 372/01)

⁵² European Commission (2020), Communication - European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience

- Strengthening **sustainable competitiveness**, to achieve the European Green Deal and putting its digital and industrial strategies into practice;
- Ensuring **social fairness**, putting into practice the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights: access to education, training and lifelong learning for everybody, everywhere in the EU;
- Building up **resilience** to react to crises, based on the lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic.”⁵³

As indicated in the novel Skills Agenda (Action 8: Skills of life), “the Commission, together with Member States, will work on new priorities for the European Agenda for Adult Learning.”⁵⁴ It is important that such a plan for the adult learning sector is developed at European level, to encourage Member States to continue working on adult learning. EU policy focus on the sector emphasises its importance in ensuring equal and inclusive societies and labour markets, leading to innovation and sustainable economies. The **COVID-19 crisis warrants a European level response and European level solidarity**, at least when it comes to finding common responses and learning lessons from other countries’ experiences. This new adult learning agenda could enable the sector to showcase its importance in the policy arena and would show the long-term commitment of the European Commission and Member States in supporting the role of adult learning in overcoming the crisis and building a more resilient Europe.

⁵³ See: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223>

⁵⁴ European Commission (2020), Communication – European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, p. 14.

