

To the Prime Minister's Office

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Views on APS – The Commission's political strategy for 2009

The National Federation of Study Associations is the umbrella organisation behind Sweden's adult education associations. The Federation's views on APS 2009 are based on the specific opportunities that adult education offers for helping reach the EU's goals. Active citizenship and lifelong learning are pre-requisites for a successful democracy and for attaining the ambitious targets of the Lisbon Strategy – to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010.

The view of the National Federation of Study Associations is that democracy and education are key to achieving the goals of a sustainable, competitive and knowledge-based EU and should accordingly be given a more clearly defined role in the introduction of the political strategy.

The National Federation of Study Associations concurs with the Commission's communication in *It is never too late to learn* (2006) that "Adult learning has not always gained the recognition it deserves in terms of visibility, policy prioritisation and resources, notwithstanding the political emphasis placed on lifelong learning in recent years. This dichotomy between political discourse and reality is even more striking when set against the background of the major challenges confronting the Union." This communication describes adult education as an important element of lifelong learning, which has a key role to play in developing citizenship and skills. Adult education is defined as all forms of adult learning engaged in by adults after completion of formal education. The Commission's action plan on adult education *It is always a good time to learn* (2007) aims to help strengthen the adult learning sector in order to be able to use its full capacity. This is a complex sector, with a wide variety of providers, reaching all kinds of target groups. The cross-sectoral nature of adult learning is recognised.

Lifelong learning is a composite concept, which means different things to different people and often more than one thing at a time. Researcher Gert Biesta (UK) talks of the triangle of lifelong learning. One aspect of lifelong learning concerns the acquisition of new skills and knowledge in relation to working life. This is important for the individual's employability and financial welfare as well as the welfare of the entire economy (the economic dimension). Another dimension of lifelong learning concerns personal development and self-realisation (the personal dimension). A third dimension of lifelong learning concerns social inclusion, empowerment, democratic understanding and striving to achieve, and is important not only for the individual's well-being, but for the quality of the democratic community (the democratic dimension).

The Commission's work document *Progress towards the Lisbon Objectives in education and training, 2007 Indicators and Benchmarks* emphasises all these dimensions: "Lifelong learning is fundamental, not only for the competitiveness, and economic prosperity of the EU, but also for social inclusion, employability, active citizenship and the personal fulfilment of people."

However, in reality, the focus of the EU's initiatives has been on the economic function, with initiatives mainly in formal learning. Yet lifelong learning is obviously about more than merely economic benefits – it also provides individuals with opportunities for personal development and access to democratic forums. It is important to stress that the democratic dimension, with a focus on



active citizenship, is closely linked to the question of motivation: How does one motivate citizens to learn?

The view of the National Federation of Study Associations is that it is important to invest in the economic, personal and democratic dimensions of lifelong learning to reach the EU's goals. A cohesive strategy is needed for all forms of learning, in which both formal and non-formal learning have their place.

The 2008 Status Report drafted by the Council and Commission regarding implementation of the work programme "Education and Training 2010" *Lifelong learning as a basis for knowledge, creativity and innovation* (2007) states that adult participation in lifelong learning is no longer on track to achieve the EU benchmark. "Greater efforts are still required to raise skill levels in the population and to achieve flexibility and security across the labour market."

The National Federation of Study Associations is convinced that greater efforts in the field of non-formal learning are required if the EU is to succeed in the challenge of reaching the goals stated in the Strategy of Lisbon and motivate people to learn. This is particularly true for marginalised people and those with only limited education.

Sweden's non-formal adult education movement comprises an independent parallel system to the formal education system. Government support to non-formal adult education in Sweden is based on the fact that its role is different to that of formal education and is justified primarily by the fact that it helps reinforce and develop democratic principles whilst promoting a greater interest in culture throughout society. Priority should be given to narrowing the education gap. Sweden's non-formal adult education is characterised by the diversity of the forms in which it is offered, the selection and the degree of participation, and also by the fact that it is free and voluntary, does not follow any central curriculum and bears a profile that reflects the responsible party's ideologies and needs in the civil society. In study circles, individuals have an opportunity to learn from differences. When people whose paths would not normally cross meet in this way, new ideas and new insights inevitably come to light. A kind of cross-fertilisation occurs, and this contributes not only to the development of those present, but also to the development of society as a whole. This mix is a crucial element of a successful democracy – and is therefore crucial for the EU.

Non-formal adult education helps strengthen civil society's organisations and in doing so reinforces the democratic infrastructure for citizens. Learning in non-formal and informal contexts also provide opportunities for personal development, which through improved self-confidence and broadened horizons will generate positive effects for both the individual and for society as a whole. Non-formal and informal learning are also significant in terms of how they affect citizens' ability to cope with change and new demands in working life, as well as handling unemployment and exclusion.

In order to reinforce the democratic dimension of lifelong learning, adult education associations provide people with the tools to influence local opinion on matters affected by EU decisions. By operating according to the democratic model "Bridging the gap between people and their elected representatives" (attached), adult education associations can channel the needs and views of citizens through to political decision-makers and government agencies and they can function as a democratic resource when decision-makers want to inform citizens and hear their opinions. In other words, adult education associations can help bridge the gap between the people and their elected representatives. The view of the National Federation of Study Associations is that there is a pressing need for an exchange of experiences in which different models of citizenship and dialogue can be discussed.



The National Federation of Study Associations recommends that the EU in its political strategy for 2009 gives greater priority to the task of developing communication channels between the people and their elected representatives in the EU. In its contacts with the Government, the National Federation of Study Associations has proposed that an adult education conference be held on this theme during the Swedish EU presidency.

In many countries in Europe, movements corresponding to the Swedish non-formal adult education system enjoy a vaguely official recognition. Sweden (along with other Nordic countries with a long tradition of non-formal learning) can play an active part and be used as a resource by virtue of its long tradition of both non-formal and informal learning. This is also reflected in the status report regarding implementation of the work programme “Education and Training 2010” in which the Nordic countries and the UK report the highest rates for adult participation in education. Study circles ensure that many participants have the strength to move on to formal learning and the labour market.

The non-formal adult education movement in Sweden is best poised to reach the adult section of the population. This has been demonstrated by the “Knowledge Boost”, public information campaigns prior to the referendums on the EU and EMU and the adult education associations’ efforts to bridge the digital gap – one of today’s greatest democratic challenges.

In a communication to the Government in September 2005, the National Federation of Study Associations proposed a European-style Knowledge Boost, *“The Lisbon Strategy, lifelong learning and non-formal adult education*

Lisbon Strategy’s degree of

achievement in which non-formal adult education should be given an important role.

In order to reach those target groups prioritised by the EU, the National Federation of Study Associations proposes an investment in a European-style Knowledge Boost similar to that carried out in Sweden.

During the Swedish EU presidency in the second half of 2009, a conference will be organised as a follow-up of the action plan on adult education, to report on the results achieved and promote a discussion of how this work may be continued.

The view of the National Federation of Study Associations is that this would be a good opportunity for Sweden and the Swedish non-formal adult education movement to report good examples of the economic, personal and democratic function of life-long learning, and to launch a European-style Knowledge Boost initiative.

On behalf of the National Federation of Study Associations

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