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Introduction

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NATIONAL POLICIES OF ADULT AND LIFELONG LEARNING AND EDUCATION: SLOVENIA

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General Historical Background of ALE and LLL

Before independence, Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia, which existed from its founding in the aftermath of World War II until its collapse in 1992. Yugoslavia was a socialist state, decentralised and organised as a federation with a system of workers' self-management and social property. Unlike other socialist states under the influence of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia experienced a *liberal wave* in political and public life during the 1960s. This meant, among other things, that people did not need a visa or permission to travel to the West, allowing academics to travel, attend conferences, access books, and collaborate in research projects. Education was public, and adult education emerged in response to the need to educate workers (vocational education for industry) and society as a whole (socio-political education for socialist society). Adult education practices were supported by state infrastructure, including People's and Workers' Universities, adult education schools, and adult education centres in companies. Adult education development also took place at the university level, where study and research were conducted under the newly emergent science called *Andragogy* (Mikulec, 2019, 2021).

The changes resulting from the development of the new state (i.e. the adoption of a new constitution and the transition to a market economy and parliamentary democracy) also required significant changes in the educational system. Consequently, common European political, cultural, and moral values, integral to respect for human rights, the rule of law, plural democracy, tolerance, and solidarity, were recognised as the foundation for the development of a new education system (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport, 1995). During this period, the 'old' adult education infrastructure collapsed (especially Workers' Universities and most adult education centres in large companies). However, the state introduced a

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range of systemic measures that gave new impetus to the development of adult education: special funds were allocated in the state budget for adult education, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE) and other adult education professional bodies were established, a special adult education law was enacted in 1996, and in 1998, the national programme for adult education was prepared by the SIAE. Furthermore, several new private adult education providers were established, new adult education associations emerged, and new forms of provision were introduced (e.g. study circles, self-directed learning centres and lifelong learning weeks) (Mikulec, 2021).

Current relevant national legislation pertaining to adult and lifelong learning (ALE) and lifelong learning (LLL)

In 2007, a *Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Slovenia* was officially published by the Ministry of Education and co-financed by the ESF. The Strategy was prepared and implemented under the EU programme Education & Training 2010. However, since the Strategy was not accepted by the government, it remained a *dead letter on paper* and was never implemented in practice.

Current national policies and strategic documents that explicitly refer to lifelong learning include the following policies (cf. Mikulec, 2023; Računsko sodišče RS, 2022):

Slovenia's Development Strategy by 2030 (Strategija razvoja Slovenije 2030, 2017): The Strategy lists “*learning throughout life*” as one of the country's five strategic orientations for achieving quality of life for all. LLL is key to achieving most of the Strategy's objectives: knowledge and skills for quality of life and work; economic stability; a competitive and socially responsible business sector; an inclusive labour market and quality jobs; a low-carbon, circular economy; sustainable management of natural resources; a trusted legal system; a safe and secure Slovenia; and the efficient management of public services.

Strategy for a Long-Lived Society (Strategija dolgožive družbe, 2017): The Strategy, the vision of which is to promote a society and systems that ensure “*prosperity and quality of life for all in a changing demographic context*” (p. 28), has divided the orientations into four pillars: labour market and education; independent, healthy and secure lives for all generations; inclusion in society; creating an environment for active ageing. In the first pillar (i.e., labour market and education), the Strategy highlights the effects of digitalisation on the emergence of new occupations and changed ways of communicating,

which make it necessary to “*adapt education systems and strengthen lifelong learning and training*” (p. 12). In its analysis of the labour market and education, the Strategy further highlights the insufficient promotion of “*lifelong learning for older people*” and that “*demographic change, which requires longer working lives, also increases the need for lifelong participation in education and training*” (p. 17). In fact, the proportion of people enrolled in lifelong learning programmes in Slovenia is declining with age at a faster rate than the EU average. This is why, as the Strategy notes, “*the involvement of older people in lifelong learning or training is important for their labour market participation, productivity at work and social inclusion*” (p. 41). Government action should therefore focus on “*strengthening the (culture of) lifelong learning of individuals in society and enterprises*”, “*increasing the involvement of older people in lifelong learning to enhance employability and to enable lifelong career orientation for development and change*” (p. 42) and “*expanding lifelong cultural education programmes*” (p. 58).

Slovenian Smart Specialisation Strategy - S4 (Slovenska strategija pametne specializacije - S4, 2017): The Strategy aims to achieve a highly productive economy with added value. It pursues the fundamental objective of creating sustainable technologies and services for healthy living to position Slovenia as a green, active, healthy and digital region with world-class conditions for creativity and innovation. It lists two key instruments for strengthening the development competences and innovation potential in the area of knowledge and employee competences: (1) competence centres for human resources development 2.0 (implementation of training programmes, networking of companies, mentoring schemes and provision of “*lifelong career orientation*” services); (2) scholarships (staff scholarships from companies) (pp. 33-34).

Guidelines for the implementation of Active Employment Policy measures for the period 2021-2025 (Smernice za izvajanje ukrepov Aktivne politike zaposlovanja za obdobje 2021-2025, 2020): The Guidelines provide an overarching framework for the implementation of active employment policy (orientations for the development of measures and programmes). For actions to achieve target 4 of the policy, i.e. “*Addressing structural mismatches in the labour market in order to provide skills for the labour market*” (p. 9), the following support measures are listed in addition to the inclusion of the unemployed in education and training programmes:

1. Lifelong orientation, in particular in-depth career counselling, knowledge of labour market needs - Employment Forecaster, Occupational Barometer, Career Platform
2. Cooperation with education (career orientation for young people, lifelong learning centres)

3. Cooperation with social partners.

In support of active employment policies, "*lifelong career guidance services*" (p. 4) are thus provided. The guidelines specifically point out that lifelong learning "*can make an important contribution to the employability of older people*" (p. 8), as well as that LLL is crucial for employability.

Slovenian Industrial Strategy 2021-2030 (Slovenska industrijska strategija 2021-2030, 2021): The key objective of the Strategy is to strengthen the "*competitiveness, productivity and innovation of the economy*" (p. 10) and its core vision is that Slovenian industry be "*green, creative and smart*" (p. 13). In the context of smart development and the strengthening of new competences, retraining and new forms of work, it is pointed out that the smart strategy is focused on strengthening the competences of employees and that, based on the monitoring of the gaps in the competences of employees, "*appropriate education and training programmes can be designed to strengthen the competences needed to work and develop in the green, smart, digital and creative field*" (p. 55). The strategy also sets out measures "*to retrain and reskill employees who will need new competences as a result of digitisation and the introduction of Industry 4.0*" (p. 56). Finally, the increased need for people with the right digital skills requires an adaptation of "*the education system and lifelong learning policies*" (p. 28).

Strategy for the Digital Transformation of the Economy (Strategija digitalne transformacije gospodarstva, 2021): The Strategy, whose vision states that Slovenia "*will become a leading hub for advanced digital technologies in Europe by 2030*", contains eleven core objectives, including "*knowledge, competences and social inclusion*" (p. 2). Given that raising digital skills is essential for "*the active participation of all in the digital economy*" (p. 28), lifelong learning is of great importance for the acquisition of digital competences and for new professions in the process of the digital transformation of companies. The Strategy also recommends "*adapting lifelong learning systems by continuously increasing digital literacy, human resource capacities and digital competences for the digital transformation of the economy*" (p. 29). The State encourages employees to receive education and training in digital competences in programmes to enhance employability and resilience in the labour market; transformation of the education system (integration of digital skills in formal and non-formal education programmes). The fourth strategic orientation of the Strategy thus aims at "*the horizontal integration of digital literacy and the increase of digital skills in lifelong learning and active employment policy programmes*" (p. 30).

National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Načrt za okrevanje in odpornost, 2021): The Plan, which forms the basis for the use of the available funding from the EU's Recovery and Resilience Fund, contains the following priority areas: green transition, digital transformation, smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (with a particular focus on strengthening "*competences, in particular digital competences and those required by new occupations*" (p. 11)), and health and social security. Lifelong learning plays an important role in the Plan in the light of demographic trends and technological developments, the latter of which are expected to equip the population with "*key competences for the digital and green transitions and for a more successful and faster transition to the labour market, as well as for higher labour market mobility, in response to the European Commission's 2019 recommendation to Slovenia to increase the employability of low-skilled and older workers by improving the relevance of education and training to labour market needs, and through lifelong learning and activation measures, including improving digital literacy. The fundamental reform will concern the modernisation of education programmes and the adaptation of the learning process to the challenges of society at all levels of education. Their modernisation will focus on the integration of digital competences.*" (p. 17). The Plan also notes that lifelong learning for employees today is "*weak, largely left to the initiative of the employee and the employer*" (p. 433) and focuses on two fundamental challenges in the lifelong learning: (1) raising participation in lifelong learning and (2) raising the digital competences of adults.

National Programme for the Promotion of the Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Republic of Slovenia until 2025 (Nacionalni program spodbujanja razvoja in uporabe umetne inteligence v RS do leta 2025, 2020): The Programme, the vision of which is to build on the achievements in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) in Slovenia and for the country "*to become internationally recognised for its competences in knowledge transfer and cutting-edge, ethical and safe technologies*" (p. 27), pays special attention to education and strengthening of human resources, which emphasises the need for lifelong learning in support of artificial intelligence. One of the measures envisaged is the preparation of "*distance learning platforms and educational content at all levels of formal education and lifelong learning, with the aim of enabling the acquisition of advanced professional digital skills, in particular in the fields of AI [artificial intelligence] and data science, and the social, ethical and legal aspects of AI*" (p. 31), as well as the development of support for "*digital training and literacy programmes for the broadest population, including vulnerable groups and in particular people with disabilities, to acquire digital competences and user skills in the field of AI (general lifelong learning, computer literacy for adults)*" (p. 31).

Digital Slovenia 2030: An overarching strategy for the development of the information society by 2030 (Digitalna Slovenija 2030: Krovna strategija razvoja informacijske družbe do leta 2030, 2023): The Strategy has the vision *"to improve the quality of life of the Slovenian population in a sustainable and trustworthy way through the digital transformation of society, the state, local communities and the economy"* (p. 6), contains six priority areas, the second of which relates to digital competences and inclusion. The Strategy notes that *"almost half of the working population in Slovenia faces a lack of digital skills"* (p. 18) and proposes, *inter alia*, that: the formal education system should ensure equal opportunities and inclusion *"for all and should include the acquisition of digital competences"* (p. 20); everyone should have the opportunity to *"acquire at least basic digital competences through quality non-formal education programmes"* (60% of the population by 2025 and 80% by 2030), and *"an excellent training programme for basic digital competences should be developed and promoted effectively"* (p. 21); special attention should be paid to the most vulnerable groups (elderly, low-educated, low-income, immigrants, unemployed, inactive) *"in order to persistently bridge the digital divide"*; improved *"digital and media literacy"* was identified as a particular strength, to be strengthened through the implementation of *"lifelong literacy"* (p. 22).

Extent of devolution of powers in ALE and LLL to regions and cities, and to social partners

There is little data by way of devolution of powers in Slovenia, which is a highly centralised country with state-based education, lifelong learning and employment policies.

Nonetheless, there are some city-led initiatives. As reported by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia (2022), in 2022, three Slovenian cities, Laško, Ljubljana and Ptuj, joined the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities. When applying for membership of UNESCO GNLC, each city commits to developing itself as a learning city, sharing experiences and best practices, fostering partnerships and strengthening policies to implement lifelong learning for all.

The Municipality of Ptuj, on being accepted into the global network, reported: *"We are delighted that Ptuj has joined UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities. We are proud, but it is also a commitment that we will continue to strive to create an environment where knowledge is accessible to all. An environment that will continue to promote lifelong learning and learning that can empower our society. An environment that offers quality*

programmes tailored to different target groups. We need to recognise that knowledge is an invisible investment that we make throughout our lives, whether formal or informal. In a period of constant change, including in the light of the pandemic, the latter is becoming an inseparable part of every individual's way of life. Slovenia is a small country, Ptuj is a small town, but we dare to say that with the knowledge we have, we can compete with many. That is why it is important to recognise the importance of lifelong learning, to support it and to address it as a priority." (Mesta občina Ptuj, 2022).

Influence and/or policy linkages to supranational organisations

The EU and OECD influence ALE policies to the greatest extent (see Mikulec, 2021; Mikulec & Guimaraes, 2023; Mikulec, 2024).

During the period 2000-2010, avoiding the risk of not adapting national education policies to the European agenda was considered a prerequisite for formal EU accession and membership. Policy transfer, understood as voluntary and negotiated transfer combining voluntary and coercive elements, was stimulated through four out of five international organisation's (IO) instruments (Jakobi, 2012): (a) dissemination of ideas (adoption of the concept of LLL, competence-based curricula and programmes, and quality assurance mechanisms); (b) standard-setting (adopting Lisbon benchmarks); (c) financial means (reforms supported by Phare and European Social Funds (ESF)); and (d) coordinative functions (EU monitoring progress of achieving Lisbon benchmarks). Furthermore, policy transfer was also supported by the OECD through one of the IOs instruments—that is, standard-setting (poor results adults achieved in the International Adult Learning Survey (IALS) benchmark).

During the period 2010-2020, following the educational agenda of the EU has remained a high priority, since the development of ALE exclusively depends on the European Social Fund (ESF). Policy transfer from the EU is stimulated through four IOs instruments (Jakobi, 2012): (a) dissemination of ideas (adoption of key competencies, learning outcomes, NQF, learner responsibility, educational guidance); (b) standard-setting (adopting Europe 2020 benchmarks); (c) financial means (activities supported by ESF); and (d) coordinative functions (EU monitoring and reporting through the European Semester and Education and Training Monitor). Therefore, key EU ideas are incorporated in the main national ALE policy, but also in formal and (publicly recognised) non-formal ALE programmes, although some of them were transformed in transition (learning outcomes approach and NQF objectives).

From the period 2020 onwards, following the educational agenda of the EU remains a high priority, while the OECD has garnered significant attention due to the skills challenges among the adult population. Policy transfer from the EU is stimulated through four IOs instruments (Jakobi, 2012): (a) dissemination of ideas (e.g., green and digital transitions, skills auditing), (b) standard-setting (adopted benchmarks and indicators set by European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training Towards the European Education Area and Beyond (2021-2030), (c) financial means (activities supported by European funds), and (d) coordinative functions (EU monitoring and reporting through European Semester and Education and Training Monitor). Policy transfer from the OECD concerning the skills and developing an effective ALE system is supported through four IOs instruments: (a) dissemination of ideas (e.g., governance of AE, investing in skills, learner-centred approach); (b) standard-setting (adopting PIAAC levels for literacy, numeracy, and digital skills); (c) coordinative functions (monitoring and country ranking through OECD skills reports); and (d) technical assistance (OECD expert missions support when developing National Skills Strategy).

Financing of LLL

As reported by the Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office (2023), total expenditure on education and training services as a share of GDP in Slovenia is 6.2%. Formal education accounted for the largest share of total supply and expenditure on education and training, by level: basic (compulsory) education 31-34%, pre-primary around 16%, tertiary 14-15% and (upper-)secondary around 12%. Among non-formal education, the largest share was accounted for by “*other education*” and vocational training, which includes driving school activities and education programmes not elsewhere classified (10-11%); education in culture, sport and recreation around 4%, in-company training for own employees 4-7%, and education-related products and services around 5%.

There are no official statistical data available just for ALE.

Proportion of spend by local and regional government: In terms of providers of education and training services on the domestic market, the institutional government sector dominates, contributing 80-82% of all services, with central government accounting for 32-34% and the local government 46-50%. Private providers delivered around 13-14% of education services, while non-profit institutions providing services to households (NPISHs) accounted for 2-3%. The general government was the largest producer or provider, mainly

in formal education (around 95%). In non-formal education, its share was around 42% (slightly lower in 2020, 35%) (Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office, 2023).

The role of sectors and involvement of community stakeholders

In Slovenia, ALE is defined as education, training, and learning to acquire, update, expand, and deepen knowledge; it also includes both VET and general education for personal development, cultural enlightenment, and social needs. It comprises (1) formal education programmes—that is, (1a) basic schools for adults; (1b) programmes of (general or vocational) upper-secondary education (which are the same for youth and adults); and (2) non-formal education programmes, with these being either (2a) publicly recognised by the state—that is, adopted by the Ministry of Education and aiming at raising literacy levels, improving basic skills and/or educational attainment of adults or (2b) not publicly recognised (programmes offered within active labour market policy and other general AE programmes). Therefore, labour-market AE comprises programmes that are either formal (that is, initial VET programmes that are the same for youth and adults) or non-formal (that is, not publicly recognised training programmes offered under active labour market policy by mostly private providers) (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023; OECD, 2018).

Upper-secondary schools are responsible for formal VET programmes) and ALE centres/Folk universities for basic education and upper-secondary programmes)

Non-formal education is an important form of education for the adult population. It covers organised education, learning or training of adults for work, social activity and personal life. The range of non-formal adult education programmes is very varied and diverse and includes publicly valid adult education programmes which do not lead to a publicly valid qualification (hereinafter: 'publicly valid adult education programmes'). Publicly valid adult education programmes are those adult education programmes which are adopted by the Minister for Education on the proposal of the Council of Experts responsible for adult education. The main objectives of the programmes are to acquire and raise the level of literacy and basic skills and to improve the general educational attainment of adults. They are carried out by legal entities which, in accordance with the law governing the organisation and financing of education and training, are entered in the register kept by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Upon successful completion of a public adult education programme, participants receive a certificate of completion of training, which is a public document with an annex

containing an inventory of the knowledge and skills acquired during the programme (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023).

Non-formal education programmes are aimed at both the public (in general) and specific target groups of adults. Adult learning in non-formal education programmes does not lead to the acquisition of a publicly valid qualification. The providers of non-formal adult education programmes financed from public funds are legal and natural persons registered to carry out adult education activities and legal persons which have adult education activities specified in their basic act, unless otherwise provided for by other laws (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023).

The tracking of the effective implementation of policies

Several laws regulate ALE, and the *Adult Education Act* (2018) defines public interests determined by the *Adult Education Master Plan* (AEMP) (Ministrstvo za vzgojo in izobraževanje, 2022). Thus far, three AEMPs have been adopted by the National Assembly: the first covered the 2004-2010 period, the second the 2013-2020 period, and the third covered the 2022-2030 period. To foster equality in adult access to education through appropriate distribution of funds, AEMPs defined priority areas, goals, and measures for implementation. Priority areas included (1) non-formal education (e.g., programmes for literacy skills, social cohesion, etc.); (2) formal education (programmes for improving formal education attainment of adults); and (3) AE for the labour market (programmes of active labour market policy and provision of RPL) (Mikulec, 2021, 2024).

The third AEMP (2022) now valid, is based on the EU's three umbrella benchmarks: the first and second related to the Labour Force Survey (LFS), which states that adults' involvement in LLL will increase to 19% (measured in four weeks' period) and 60% (measured in twelve months' period) by 2030, and the third related to the Adult Education Survey (AES), which states that participation will increase to 66% by 2030. However, other indicators based on EU's surveys and PIAAC data are set for AEMP priority areas—for example, the proportion of adults with the lowest achievement in literacy and numeracy skills will decrease below 20% by 2030, the participation of low qualified adults (aged 25-64) will be at least 30%, the proportion of adults aged 16-74 years with at least basic digital skills will be 70% by 2030.

Usually, at the mid-term of AEMP, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education does the evaluation of how these benchmarks are being achieved (or not)². However, there is currently a discussion about establishing a more robust methodology to monitor the archiving of benchmark sets. The methodology still needs to be adopted by the Expert Council responsible for ALE.

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² For example, for the first AEMP (2004-2010) this is done by Beltram (2012) and Beltram et al. (2010) and for the second AEMP (2013-2020) this is done by Sotošek and Beltram (2021). Some of the main findings are: insufficient participation of adults from vulnerable groups in education remains a major and unsolved problem over the years; lacking agreement at system level on validation/recognition of non-formal and informal learning for adults; lack of inter-ministerial and stakeholders' engagement in governance of adult education; dominance of the programmes aiming at improvement of human capital, while programmes aiming at improvement of social and cultural capital are underfunded and underrepresented, etc.

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