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Introduction

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NATIONAL POLICIES OF ADULT AND LIFELONG LEARNING AND EDUCATION: THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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General historical background of ALE and LLL

The historical development of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) and Lifelong Learning (LLL) in the Czech Republic is best understood as a long transition from a highly centralised, state-socialist model of ALE to an increasingly liberalised and labour-market-oriented system of ALE. In the communist period before 1989, adult education formed part of a centrally planned and fully state-subsidised order. It was administered by state authorities, standardised across sectors, and strongly infused with ideology. ALE was expected not only to provide vocational qualifications for the socialist economy, but also to contribute to the political and moral formation of the “socialist man.” In comparative terms, Czechoslovakia possessed a relatively developed adult learning system, especially in the area of formal adult education and enterprise-based vocational training. At the same time, however, two components largely absent from the pre-1989 system were welfare-related training, since official unemployment did not exist, and adult liberal education in the contemporary sense, because independent civic associations were missing (Kalenda et al., 2025).

The democratic transition after 1989 constituted a critical juncture. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Czech system underwent rapid deregulation, decentralisation, de-ideologisation, and commodification. The previously centralised architecture of ALE was dismantled faster than in much of post-socialist Europe, but no coherent new legislative framework replaced it until 2004. State coordination weakened considerably, responsibility was fragmented across ministries, and ALE became increasingly governed by market demand and competition. As a result, formal adult education contracted, workplace training declined in

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many firms, and participation in organised learning became more dependent on individual socioeconomic resources. While new private providers emerged and civil society revived, the overall system remained unstable and under-institutionalised. The dominant policy orientation strongly favoured market liberalism, while welfare policy concentrated more on passive social protection than on active investment in ALE (Kalenda, 2024).

A second phase began after The Czech Republic's accession to the European Union in 2004. Between 2004 and 2013, the system moved toward what could be termed *embedded flexibilization* (Kalenda et al., 2025). This did not reverse liberalisation, but rather supplemented it with gradual state intervention designed to improve coordination, standardisation, and the supply of ALE, above all for labour-market purposes. Under the influence of European LLL discourse, the state adopted strategies, legislative reforms, and institutional instruments such as the National Qualifications System. EU funding played a crucial role in expanding non-formal, job-related education, especially within enterprises, and in strengthening the policy language of LLL. Nonetheless, the principal objective remained employability, competitiveness, and labour-market efficiency. ALE thus became more organised and partially regulated, but it continued to be oriented primarily toward economic rather than civic or emancipatory ends.

Since 2014, a third phase of renewed deregulation has emerged. Although LLL has remained present in policy discourse, direct state engagement has weakened, funding has declined, and ALE has lost strategic priority (Kalenda et al., 2025).

Over the long run, Czech ALE has followed a sequential yet persistent path toward a liberal model: formal adult education has diminished, welfare-related provision has remained limited, and employer-sponsored non-formal learning has become increasingly central. The overall trajectory therefore reveals not a linear expansion of LLL, but a historically specific reconfiguration in which market mechanisms, EU impulses, and fluctuating state capacities have jointly shaped the Czech adult learning system.

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

In comparison to other areas of education, particularly primary and secondary education, ALE and LLL have been given secondary priority in The Czech Republic in the last two

decades (Kopecký et al., 2024). Consequently, the legislation from the mid-2000s and late 1990s governing ALE remains in effect.

Specifically, the primary legislative basis for ALE in The Czech Republic is Act No. 179/2006 Coll., on the Verification and Recognition of Further Education Results. This legislation established the National Qualifications Framework (NSK) and introduced a system for recognising qualifications acquired outside the formal education system. The Amendment to the Education Act (Act No. 178/2016 Coll.) introduced significant changes by creating a framework for validating non-formal and informal learning outcomes. This legislation aligns with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and facilitates the recognition of prior learning experiences.

The Education Act (Act No. 561/2004 Coll.) is another crucial piece of legislation, particularly Section 114, which specifically addresses adult education within the formal education system. This law enables adults to complete their primary and secondary education through various flexible pathways. For example, they could enrol in a part-time study version of the programme that allows them to balance academic pursuits with employment or follow an individualised study plan tailored to their specific needs.

Regarding vocational education and training, the Act on Employment (Act No. 435/2004 Coll.) plays a vital role. This legislation regulates retraining programmes and establishes the framework for labour market training initiatives. The legislation further outlines the responsibilities of the Labour Office in supporting adult education and professional development.

The foundation for policy development regarding ALE in The Czech Republic is derived from extensive international surveys, particularly the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the Adult Education Survey (AES) conducted by Eurostat, and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Notably, data obtained from the LFS is routinely employed to measure adherence to the EU benchmark in this domain and to formulate various policy initiatives, including targeted projects aimed at enhancing the availability of organised learning opportunities. This includes provisions for individuals with low levels of digital literacy and young adults transitioning into the labour market. For instance, one such initiative, *Youth Guarantee*, is aimed at providing apprenticeship opportunities and training for young adults under the age of 30 who are transitioning into the labour market and are currently unemployed (ÚP, 2025).

Although The Czech Republic devoted considerable space to its ALE and LLL vision and strategy in the 2000s (see MEYS, 2001, 2003, 2007), activity in this area has diminished over the last decade. Currently, the strategy for ALE is outlined in the *Strategy for Education Policy of The Czech Republic 2030+* (MEYS, 2020), which allocates only limited attention to ALE and LLL. The sub-chapter on ALE underscores the significance of developing a comprehensive lifelong learning system, which includes

- (a) digital skills enhancement across all age groups,
- (b) improvement of validation procedures for informal learning,
- (c) strengthening connections between education providers and employers, and
- (d) development of micro-credentials aligned with European standards.

However, beyond that, the current vision of ALE in The Czech Republic is rather unclear, as the country has faced defunding of initiatives in this area, extremely low levels of unemployment, and a social structure that is adequate compared to the demand for skills (Kalenda, 2024; Karger, 2021).

All current policy objectives and benchmarks in this area are mainly established from above, shaped more by the influence of the EU than by local conditions and demand.

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

The ALS in The Czech Republic is highly liberalised. Consequently, the support schemes for ALE and LLL provided by the state are minimal, which is evident from very low public spending on active labour market policies - under 0.5% of GDP over the last decade - in general, and on training in particular - under 0.01% of GDP over the last decade (MLSA, 2024).

Policy is formulated at the national level by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport and the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs. The involvement of regions in LLL policy is minimal both in policy formulation and in tailoring specific measures for regional conditions. A similar situation exists at the level of city and municipal administrations.

Social partners have played a minimal role in ALE since the 1990s, as unionisation in The Czech Republic has declined to one of the lowest levels in Europe. The social partners have consistently favoured wage bargaining and other social benefits over training initiatives and active labour market policies (Kalenda, 2023, 2024).

Unlike in other Central European countries, such as Hungary, the concept of learning cities (Nemeth, 2020) has never gained traction in The Czech Republic.

Influence and/or policy linkages to supranational organisations

Among various supranational organisations, the EU wields the highest level of influence on policy formulation in the field of ALE in The Czech Republic. The country has fully adopted the EU LLL framework and has adhered to the EU benchmarks for participation rates in ALE since the late 2000s (Kopecký, 2014; Kopecký & Šerák, 2015). The current agendas within ALE policy, including micro-credentials, recognition of prior learning, and others, are entirely derived from the EU framework (MEYS, 2020). Following the example set by the EU, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport has been advancing the implementation of a micro-credentials agenda among key providers of adult higher education. This initiative aims to facilitate the recognition of partial achievements from non-formal education courses organised by universities as components of formal qualifications. In parallel, the Ministries of Employment and Social Affairs have been developing the concept of Individual Learning Accounts. These accounts should, in the future, provide each individual with a comprehensive overview of all attained qualifications, including those based on micro-credentials, alongside access to resources that support lifelong learning.

Moreover, all major policy measures related to implementation and project objectives – encompassing both the supply and demand sides of organised adult education – are co-financed by the EU Structural Funds. These funds primarily support initiatives by public and private organisations aimed at enhancing workplace learning. Between 2014 and 2019, the training of nearly 49,000 employees was supported through these funds (MLSA, 2019). A current initiative focuses on improving adults' digital skills, offering a €2,000 voucher to each adult who applies and undertakes the associated training (MLSA, 2025).

Although the budget for this area has declined since the 2000s, it still represents the main financial tool in the field. Between 2007 and 2013, the budget stood at €4.7 billion. However, this was reduced to €2.6 billion for the period 2014–2020 and declined even further during 2021–2024 (Kalenda, 2021; 2024).

Other supranational organisations, such as the OECD, World Bank, and UNESCO, play a secondary role in ALE policy formulation in The Czech Republic. While linkages can be identified between the OECD agenda focused on skills and the main Czech policy strategies, its focus on the formulation and implementation of actual measures is rather limited.

Financing of LLL

The core financing of ALE in The Czech Republic is located within the labour market sectors, as most organised ALE is delivered as job-related non-formal education within company settings. This accounts for 85 to 90% of all participation rates in ALE. Currently, according to CVTES (2024), 86% of enterprises provide training for their employees, with this level of training even higher in the public sector. Consequently, two-thirds of all participation in The Czech Republic is somewhat financially supported (fully or partially) by employers.

Conversely, state expenditure on ALE is quite minimal. The Czech Republic not only has one of the lowest expenditures on ALMP and training (see also above) among OECD countries, but also the investment in the ALE sector within the formal education system, as part of *second-chance education*, is limited. Although the state fully covers any first-time formal education at the next International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level, the number of adult students in adult basic (ISCED 2) and adult general education (ISCED 3) remains minimal. A more favourable situation exists in adult higher education (ISCED 6 and 7), where higher education fees at public universities are covered by the state. However, the number of adult students in part-time study programmes for those over 25 has declined dramatically since the 2010s. Most of these expenses are covered by the national government.

A vital tool for supporting, especially the supply side of organised learning opportunities in The Czech Republic, has been EU structural funds, which supported the engagement of 50,000 to 100,000 individuals annually from 2004 to 2013. Currently, the numbers range from around 10,000 persons per year (Kalenda, 2024; MLSA, 2019).

The role of sectors and involvement of community stakeholders

Non-formal, job-related (vocational) education dominates the landscape of ALE in The Czech Republic, with 90% of all participation originating from this sector. In contrast, the formal adult education sector remains quite small. Currently, participation rates in formal adult education are among the lowest in Europe. Between 2013 and 2022, the annual enrolment of non-traditional students in adult higher education declined from 93,000 to 60,000, returning to levels seen in the early 2000s (Kalenda, 2024). In relative terms, this corresponds to a participation rate of approximately 2% among adults aged 25 to 64. By contrast, the European Average is 6%, and notably higher in the Nordic countries – reaching 14% in Finland and 21% in Sweden (Eurostat, 2024).

This is also true for training under the umbrella of active labour market policies, which have experienced a downturn over the last decade. Following an economic downturn peaking between 2011 and 2013, participation in public training and retraining programmes fell to 20,000 to 30,000 individuals annually (Kalenda, 2024).

Formal adult education is delivered by a network of public and private schools and universities. In this context, approximately 90% of pre-tertiary (ISCED 2-5) formal adult education is provided by public schools, while 80% of higher formal adult education (ISCED 6-7) is likewise (Kalenda, 2023).

Around 4,000 organisations offer non-formal education in The Czech Republic for both vocational and non-vocational purposes. However, the primary providers of non-formal education are employers who engage in regular training practices, including small and medium-sized enterprises. Within these categories, 84-93% of companies train their employees (CVTES, 2024).

Support for non-vocational entities providing non-formal education is limited and depends on their agendas, with larger institutions in bigger cities being in a more advantageous position. Although there is a long tradition of libraries and museums in The Czech Republic, they appear to play a more significant role in informal learning than in non-formal education.

Overall, the level of coordination among various stakeholders is minimal, often non-existent, and when it does exist, it tends to be on an ad hoc basis rather than built on a structural foundation with strategic aims.

The tracking of the effective implementation of policies

The tracking of the implementation of ALE policies is primarily conducted through the LFS and the Adult Education Survey (AES), which are used by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, as well as the Ministry of Education and Social Affairs, to monitor participation rates in ALE. Although data from the first wave of PIAAC was also available in The Czech Republic, it has not been utilised for policymaking in the last decade. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and Social Affairs evaluates the effectiveness and impact of individual projects funded by the European Structural Funds.

Moreover, the recognition of prior learning is also monitored by public authorities. Between 2010 and 2020, a total of 231,472 successful examinations were completed, averaging approximately 21,000 per year (Karger, 2021).

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