

# The Netherlands

## Working Paper

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# **Adult Education as a Means to Active Participatory Citizenship**





## **Adult Education as a Means to Active Participatory Citizenship (EduMAP)**

*EduMAP is a Horizon 2020 research project focusing on adult education among young adults at risk of social exclusion. Particular attention is paid to educational policies and practices needed to foster active citizenship among vulnerable young people.*

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## 1. Challenges in AE provision and access

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The case, studied in the Netherlands, presented an example of a VET programme (coding skills development), aiming to support young adults at risk of social exclusion (specifically focusing on refugees, migrants and other young adults at risk of social exclusion). In the Netherlands, only one programme was researched (NL\_GP1).

Adult education in the Netherlands generally caters for people aged 18 and over (with some programmes being available to 16 and 17 year olds). Key focus areas are literacy and numeracy skills as well as obtaining qualifications. The main target groups for adult education programmes are Dutch people with literacy problems; immigrants who need Dutch language support; the elderly; as well as other specific groups such as young mothers; and the long term unemployed (Eurydice, 2015). The Programme was developed to challenge how the country currently deals with refugees and asylum seekers

AE access challenges reported in the context of this programme are linked to some important factors, including (1) language competency, i.e. lack of language ability can be a challenge and can prevent effective engagement with AE (2) challenging and competitive selection process as well as the intensity of the programme; (3) the current social climate related to the public resentment towards migrants and refugees (4) lack of funding affecting AE sector.

The application process is challenging and involves a number of stages. Although Learners say that they were aware of what knowledge, skills and attributes the programme was looking for, the different stages of the application process, some of these stages may be particularly challenging for some applicants. For example, the last stage involves applicants spending a day at the Boot Camp working on different coding challenges and scenarios in teams in order that the programme can observe the team working and communication skills of applicants. This likely to be particularly challenging for those people who do not speak the language fluently, and for those people who are not self-confident. The ability to speak the local language in order to be able to participate in Dutch society, particularly to be able to contribute through economic engagement, is regarded as critical, and for some VYA lack of language ability can be a challenge and can prevent effective engagement and access to AE. In to challenges hits, the programme is willing to accept people on the course who do not have high level language ability. This flexibility is positive in the sense that it prevents further marginalisation of VYA. However for students to take full advantage of the course and to ensure successful completion it may be that language tuition should become an integral part of the programme. Another related challenge, is the context in which the programme is working. One of the policy makers comments that the local population are sometimes antagonistic towards initiatives that are seen as helping the immigrant population and taking away funding from 'local' people.

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## 2. Gender and diversity aspects tackled in the studied programmes

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The vision of the programme, as described by one of the co-funders, is about giving young adults a second chance and enable them to have a successful career. The programme is characterised by the drive to ensure that students come from diverse backgrounds, which is also, in part, a response to the current lack of diversity within the IT industry (including gender diversity).

Within the programme there is a strong emphasis to try and ensure the programme has a balance of both men and women. As noted by one of the co-funders, when the programme first started, the majority of students attending were male. This was recognised as an issue to be addressed, specifically the ambition was to have a better reflection of the world inside the classroom. As explained by one of the co-founders there is a strong belief that companies would be more profitable and more successful through having an inclusive workforce which involves different perspectives.

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### 3. The concept of APC as it is defined, understood or approached in the context of the study by different respondent groups

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Citizenship education in the Netherlands is underpinned by discourses that express concern about political apathy as well as by tensions between native Dutch citizens and non-western immigrants. Understandings and conceptualisations of APC indicate both some variations and common themes, as indicated by our interviews with professionals and learners across NL-based data. Generally, professionals and young adults considered active participatory citizenship as focusing on making contributions to society and community, for example by sharing specific skills (in this case technical expertise) for the benefit of learners themselves and of communities. This was reflected in the programme's approach which emphasised immersive and peer learning, as well as working on projects (IT-based applications) with a clear community impact. The significance of language competency as a means to facilitate this contribution has also been noted. More specifically, across different respondent groups, the following has been highlighted:

#### *Policy makers*

For policy makers the interpretation of AC is strongly related to the significance of language competency. As noted by one of the policymakers, there is a 'push for people to learn the language and to be able to interact in the society in the local language'. Another key aspect mentioned by AE policy makers is about the country's attitudes towards diversity and immigration in particular. He says that the local people feel that to belong to the local area both grandparents need to have been born there in order to be considered 'local', 'regardless of citizenship'. So, in this interpretation, citizenship and having the citizenship of this country versus integration, are regarded separate questions. This conception of citizenship reflects the current government rhetoric on integration, and the desire to protect Dutch values and way of life against outside influences. Overall, definitions and understandings of active citizenship indicate a thread of commonality with definitions centred on action, contribution and capacity building.

#### *Educators*

For educators the understanding and conceptualisation of APC centres on the notion of contribution, i.e. *a person who participates in the society. In this interpretation, a person's actions lead to a positive change or some kind of productive influence in the society.* For some practitioners the understandings and conceptualisations of active citizenship are framed by the notion of integration in society in economic terms (e.g. contributing through work). In addition, the importance of learning the local language in order to feel part of the local community has also been highlighted.

#### *Learners*

The interviews have indicated that learners lack confidence in providing an explicit definition of APC and often defined it somewhat implicitly. However there is a thread of commonality running through the answers that APC is about 'giving back' and contributing to society through work (either paid or voluntary) and paying taxes.

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## 4. Elements that are critical and or significant for enabling learners to become active citizens, or to develop APC competencies in the studied programmes

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The vision of the programme, as described by one of the co-funders, is about giving young adults a second chance and enable them to have a successful career. The programme is characterised by the drive to ensure that their students come from diverse backgrounds, which is also, in part, a response to the current lack of diversity within the IT industry (including gender diversity).

The programme has a strong focus on the development of *socio-economic competences* (focus on skills development). Accomplishing something that will *'later serve the community'* characterises the the programme vision of being an active citizen. There is a strong sense of *'duty and giving back to the community and society'* within the programme (including paying back taxes). Cultivating APC through equipping young adults with job-related skills and connecting them to work has been perceived as critical elements of active citizenship. One of the distinctive features of the programme is that it will accept people who are still waiting for their refugee or asylum-seeker status to be accepted or rejected (thus facilitating their access to employment sooner). Within the programme, *socio-economic citizenship* is also enhanced through the provision of workshops on interview preparation.

The diversity of young adults' backgrounds contributes to the development of *socio-cultural competences*. The programme setting, a space for Social Enterprises, provides opportunities for learners to network and make new contacts, thus enhancing their *socio-cultural skills*.

Furthermore, encouraging learners to practice their acquired competences both within and outside the class is considered another important strategy to facilitate socio-cultural competences. (e.g. through developing communication channels (apps): one example includes the development of a language app which included some simple phrases to enable communication between the Eritreans and Dutch speakers which made it easier for students to understand each other).

One of the critical pre-requisites of taking part in this programme is the ability to speak the local language in order to be able to participate in Dutch society. This has been highlighted as the *political* commitment to ensure integration through local language. For several of the Learners and Educators a critical way that the programme helps cultivate APC is because it is free to access. They are learning the knowledge and skills needed for positions such as junior developers and successfully gaining employment will *'enhance our participation in society'* because *'we are paying back our tax, so it will enhance our integration eventually'*.

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## **5. Competencies and qualifications possessed, represented and/or cultivated through by the AE practitioners who contribute to the design, development and delivery of APC programmes for VYAs**

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NL\_GP1 adopts an innovative approach to developing AE practitioner competences internally. There are no lecturers or teachers in the traditional sense. Instead students learn through self-directed learning using an online curriculum which has been developed for the course, as well as being able to use, for example Google and YouTube for assistance. After phase 1, the Boot Camp, has been completed the Learners become Guides. Learners are able to ask each other for help, as well as the Guides, but need to be mindful of the Twenty Minute Rule. Learners can only request help once they have spent at least twenty minutes trying to solve the problem themselves.

The majority of participants feel that the knowledge and skills that they acquire during the boot camp phase are sufficient to enable them to be a Guide and this contributes to their self-confidence, positive self-image image and motivation. As part of their training as Guides, they will attend skills development workshops. The workshops aim to enhance both technical and soft skills, including leadership skills.

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## 6. Critical factors and conditions (favourable and unfavourable) that affect the potential of AE policies to cultivate APC for VYAs

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### *Favourable conditions:*

In the context of the case, studied in the Netherland, our findings indicate that favorable conditions are associated with aspects such as (1) the ‘culture of giving back’; (2) language policy; (3) Decentralisation of education *and* (4) Integrated VET system. As supported by policymakers, the ‘culture of giving back’ helps to create a context conducive to policies and approaches that support VYA and encourage their participation in society, thus contributing to overall favourable conditions.

Furthermore, the current language policy provides additional stimulus for encouraging participation of VYAs in society. Although the current language policy is sometimes regarded as negatively impacting on certain groups of migrants, some commentators feel that the language policy facilitates communicating in the language of the host nation, which is considered to be a positive thing.

However, there is no guarantee at all that language ability alone will ensure immigrants’ participation and integration. This level of integration relies heavily on the acceptance and inclusion of newcomers into all aspects of society. The positive impact of decentration has also been commented on. Specifically, it has been noted that the decentralisation of education programmes and funding allows for a considerable amount of flexibility in AE provision.

VET is provided by decentralised training providers mainly at a regional level and this means that programmes and policies can respond to local need, including responding to gaps in industry. NL\_GP1 has been able to successfully use this approach to develop their programme in direct response to central government policy on integration. In addition, the notion of integrated VET system is about facilitating strong ties between vocational education programmes and employers. This has enabled NL\_GP1 to work closely with employers in a variety of ways including designing the training and providing placements for students.

### *Unfavourable conditions:*

Unfavourable conditions have been linked to issues such as challenges of integration and negative perceptions towards immigrants and newcomers. The success of integration relies heavily on the acceptance and inclusion of newcomers into all aspects of society. However, levels of anti-immigrant feeling are currently high, particularly towards some groups of immigrants, and government policy has been shifting towards the inclusion of increasingly exclusionary measures. Citizenship and integration are often treated as separate issues and as noted by a policymaker, ‘You can have citizenship but still be socially excluded and still be treated like an immigrant, still be treated like a foreigner here’.

Overall, Immigration policies have become progressively tight and exclusionary, and it is increasingly difficult to become Dutch. (e.g. immigrants have been required to pay for their own integration courses and permanent residence rests on successfully completing the tests). Pressures associated with the issue of learning Dutch language to get official citizenship lead to perceiving the language as a commodity, and this does not contribute to mutual understanding and tolerance. Furthermore, it could feed into anti-immigration sentiments and intolerance towards foreigners. This can be seen as a shift from a tolerant attitude of the public on immigration and cultural diversity, to a more radical and nationalistic view, which characterizes the so-called ‘post-multiculturalism’ era. Therefore, a



significant challenge for the programme is the context in which it is working. Funding is cited as another challenge (i.e. lack of government investment). A further negative impact of funding cuts is that fewer employers are able to offer apprenticeships.

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## 7. Lessons learnt from laws and policies that contribute effectively to cultivating APC for VYAs

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The role of policies and laws in contributing to strategies to enhance the inclusion and engagement of young adults has been considered within both our desk and empirical research. In considering the interplay between policy and practice we aimed to shed light on the ways in which policy developments may either undermine or contribute to cultivating APC for VYA, and what could be learnt from these developments.

### *Learning from positive policy developments: devolved provision of AE*

While aspects of the content of adult education in the Netherlands, as well as some of the funding, are agreed at central level by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the provision through educational institutions have traditionally been devolved to local municipalities, and this this means that programmes and policies can respond to local need, including responding to gaps in industry. Therefore, the Ministry for Education, Culture and Science is responsible for coordinating education including AE at the national level and in the country's municipalities, in close cooperation with local stakeholders. Emphasis is placed on targeting AE for the specific groups, including adults with low basic skills, immigrants, minorities, young mothers and those facing unemployment. The goal is to promote more institutional autonomy and responsibility in the implementation of government policies. This policy context has enabled initiatives such as NL\_GP1 to be developed. Employers have access, via a social partnership model, with each knowledge centre having a strategic board with employer, trade union and training provider representation. This provides a strong driver for the study content to be relevant to the workplace and, in conjunction with the knowledge centres, to ensure students receive the most relevant, up to date work experience.

### *Learning from policy barriers and challenges*

Policies related to civic integration need to be implemented taking into account the context of specific target groups, particularly considering issues such as risks of vulnerability . In the context of the Netherlands, Dutch civic integration courses are designed to ensure that participants learn the Dutch language whilst using it in daily practical situations, called CP's (Cruciale Praktijksituaties) that have been aligned with the content of the civic integration. However, the gendered content and implementation of the civic integration courses stands in the way of the acclaimed policy goal to emancipate migrant women (e.g. migrant women are portrayed as culturally oppressed yet addressed primarily as mothers and voluntary social workers).

### *Learning from social inclusion policy challenges*

Welfare policy has changed so that now unemployed young people aged 18 to 27 have a four week waiting period before their application for social assistance benefits will be considered. The expectation is that young people use this time to look for work, education or training periods and that their sense of responsibility and initiative is activated through this measure. While support is provided both before and (more tailor-made) after the four-week period, there is some concern about young people who do not register for any support or benefits at all and who may be involved in crime.

### *Factors to be taken into account:*

#### Integration policy

It is suggested that a balance be achieved between the purpose of the policy and coercive

measures, to reduce the tension that comes with such civic integration policies. Integration is a lifelong process; so are language and culture learning. Policy makers should take into account that every migrant comes from a different social background, when deciding which should be the appropriate approach for integration in terms of individual language competence<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Integration and gender*

Civic integration's emancipatory potential was thought to lie in providing migrant women with language skills and knowledge of Dutch society. Policies dealing with migrant women are framed with the belief that Dutch women are [almost] already liberated. This political and policy discourse obscures the socio-cultural factors constraining all women's emancipation in the Netherlands. Research conducted on civic integration highlighted that the lack of flexible and affordable childcare is one of the highest obstacles for migrant women; an issue working Dutch women also have to deal with.

#### *Recognition of previous experience*

Credits for prior learning should be awarded, for example, where an assessment can show that a level of competence has been achieved comparable to that achieved through mainstream education.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/papers/learn-dutch-or-leave-country-role-language-dutch-integration-policies>

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## 8. Existing practices of information access and communication (emerging patterns and tendencies; people/social networks; media/platforms/channels; content/messages) about adult education in the studied programmes

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In the context of NL\_GP1, effective communication practices and patterns have been cited as strongly related to aspects such reaching out to the learners who are socially isolated or under-represented (e.g. refugees, migrants, women); using social media and online technology as a means of communication with specific target groups, facilitating communication between the learners and tutors (guides) through specific strategies (e.g. peer-to-peer learning) and communicating through personal networks and channels (e.g. family and friends). Specifically the following has been highlighted:

NL\_GP1's communication strategy is focused on reaching out to certain groups of VYA and people currently under-represented in the technology industry. NL\_GP1 promotes the programme predominantly using Google and Facebook. They also connect with the Municipality and organisations that work with NL\_GP1's target groups, such as refugees and women, to ensure that they are aware of the programme and actively promoting it to the people they work with. This has been reported as a highly effective strategy. Each of the methods of providing information to VYA highlighted by NL\_GP1 was also mentioned by different Learners (such as Facebook, Google, communication through the Municipality and friends and family networks)

Due to the way the programme is structured, there is a lot of communication between the Guides and the Learners. NL\_GP1 has been described as very communicative. There is a strong feedback culture which means that students are encouraged to give feedback 'at all times'. Practitioners will also meet if a particular problem arises. Furthermore, the NL-GP1 use peer-to-peer learning which means that there is a considerable amount of communication between learners about the programme content itself. In addition the programme uses Slack<sup>2</sup> and there are Slack channels for both Boot Campers and for the Guides 'to keep everybody on sync'.

### Communication challenges and barriers

- Some learners commented that they would have liked more information beforehand about what the programme involves (e.g. clear information about the intensity of the programme).
- Another potential challenge (linked to the point above) is that the intensity of the programme allows for little time for learners to communicate with each other on a social level. This is significant because many learners have limited networks or social capital, and more time for learner-to-learner social communication might support them with building up these important resources.

There is an expectation within the programme that learners value and make good use of the range of professional contacts which they in principle have access to through the programme's campus-based location. However, proactively networking with new people and organisations requires a lot of self-confidence, and some VYA find networking and approaching new people somewhat daunting and challenging .

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<sup>2</sup> 'Slack' is a communication tool which reduces the need for email and acts as a real-time collaboration platform. The channels are flexible and allow for public or private communication strings focused on project specific or role specific chat.

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## 9. Leveraging on VYA's information access and communication practices about adult education

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From the perspective of both the learners and professionals, the following means and strategies have been cited as important in this context of the programme:

- Technological platforms such as Slack channels are used to facilitate communication.
- The communication between learners, practitioners and those responsible for developing the curriculum and programme pedagogy is extremely fluid and there seems to be a good communication flow between all involved in the programme.
- Internal strategies, such as communication between the learners and tutors (guides) helps to develop meaningful communication practices and information access about adult education.

There are daily forums and opportunities for verbal and written feedback and learners feel that their voices and any suggestions or criticism are heard.

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## 10. Information accessed and used during the design of AE for APC programmes

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The design of the programme has been described as a co-constructive process, involving regular communication and collaboration with a variety of stakeholders (e.g. employers and policymakers). The word 'experiment' is used to describe the programme by both the Co-founders and a Board Member. The Programme was developed to challenge how the country currently deals with refugees and asylum seekers, a system which has been in place for 40-50 years. Traditionally, when people arrive they are housed in holding centres for around two years. They are expected to learn the language, and receive welfare payments. NL\_GP1 are trying to challenge this model and create a new model which potentially *gets people into work sooner*, because the programme will accept people who are waiting for their refugee or asylum-seeker status to be accepted or rejected.

In designing this programme, the co-founders talked to a variety of people and companies and, as described by one of the co-founders, *'the conversation was driven by how would you build this curriculum'*. The programmes' educational approach has thus been designed through a process of pulling in elements from the best practice and processes of different organisations. The admissions process was shaped by the Co-founder's professional experience (e.g. learning from experiences of similar programmes). Working with companies to find out what is important for students to learn has been cited as another important strategy. The Co-founders' approach to developing the programme is underpinned by the belief that learning from professional experience is important for curriculum design. As noted by one of the co-founders: *'quality comes from quantity ... if you really want to know what works you have to try a lot of things out'*.

Another important element of the curriculum design relates to taking into account learner feedback. As mentioned above, there is a strong *'feedback culture'* which means that students are encouraged to give feedback and share their perspective about the programme. There are specific strategies and approaches to facilitate this, such as 'daily stand-ups'. During the stand-up, which lasts thirty minutes and involves one Guide (AE practitioner) and five boot campers, students are asked three questions which they have to answer: what they did that previous day, what challenges they are facing, if any, and what are they planning to do today. Students are also free to email the practitioners with comments about the programme at any time. In addition to this students are asked for feedback after every Masterclass. The forms are completed anonymously so students feel more comfortable about providing honest feedback. The forms ask for student opinion on what students found most helpful about the Masterclass, what they liked best and how it could be improved. This feedback is used to make changes, develop and improve teaching and the curriculum for future students.



<http://blogs.uta.fi/edumap/>