



**BELL**  
BENEFITS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

**Benefits of Lifelong Learning - BeLL**

Final Report

Public Part

## Project information

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## Executive Summary

The Benefits of Lifelong Learning (BeLL) study investigated the benefits to learners of participation in organised non-formal, non-vocational, voluntary adult education (hereafter “liberal adult education”) in Europe. Funded by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme (“Studies and Comparative Research, KA1”), the BeLL study was carried out by a consortium of partner organisations from nine Member States plus Serbia as a tenth associated partner. The project ran from 1 November 2011 to 31 January 2014 (including a three-month extension). The final report was submitted on 31 May 2014, four months after the official end of the project (extension without additional costs).

The main purpose of the BeLL study was to investigate the individual and social benefits perceived by adult learners who participated in liberal adult education courses. An understanding of what was meant by “the benefits of learning” was defined, refined and explored in 10 European countries. The BeLL study aimed to expand the knowledge base on liberal adult education in general and on the respective liberal adult education landscapes in the 10 participating countries, and to interpret findings on the perceived benefits of learning against this background.

The study followed a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire developed, piloted and refined by the consortium. Qualitative semi-structured interviews with participants on adult education courses were conducted. In total, 8,646 valid questionnaires and 82 interviews were completed in the 10 countries.

The data showed that adult learners experience numerous benefits from liberal adult education. They feel healthier and seem to lead healthier lifestyles; they build new social networks and experience improved wellbeing. Moreover, adults who participate in liberal adult education appear to feel more motivated to engage in lifelong learning and view it as an opportunity to improve their lives. These benefits were reported by learners across all course areas, ranging from languages and the arts to sport and civic education. However, one of the major challenges of the project was to be clear that the study provides evidence on self-reported *perceptions* of the benefits of learning by learners themselves and not objective evidence about benefits observed in practice or measured in behavioural modifications.

To date, national and international dissemination activities have included the presentation of conference papers, the publication of articles in daily newspapers and adult education and scientific journals, as well as the creation of a project website ([www.bell-project.eu](http://www.bell-project.eu)) and printed project materials. Further publications will follow, including additional research articles. Project partners communicated the findings to experts and stakeholders in their countries. Through these activities, the BeLL consortium ensured the sustainability of the project outcomes and raised awareness of the project as well as a wider range of publication and media activities.

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# 1. Project Objectives

The main purpose of the BeLL study was to investigate the individual and social benefits perceived by adult learners who had participated in liberal adult education courses. An understanding of what was meant by “the benefits of learning” was defined, refined and explored in 10 European countries. The definition of “benefits” used in this study was based on the “Wider Benefits of Learning” approach which has been used for example in the UK (Schuller et al., 2001) and in a Finnish study on the benefits of liberal adult education (Manninen, 2010). The BeLL study aimed to expand the knowledge base on liberal adult education in general and on the respective landscapes of liberal adult education in the 10 participating countries, and to interpret the findings on the perceived benefits of learning against this background. While earlier studies on the wider benefits of lifelong learning focused on the impacts of vocational education and training (VET) and mainly on its monetary benefits at individual (such as higher earnings) and societal (such as higher tax revenues) levels, the focus of the BeLL study was the area of liberal adult education, that is learning activities which are non-formal, non-vocational and voluntary. In this, the BeLL study operationalised and expanded on the “Wider Benefits of Learning” approach to cover the whole range of lifelong learning activities, including liberal adult education.

The study’s research objectives were drafted during the project’s inception stages and developed during the course of the research. The BeLL study’s aims were:

- To understand, refine and develop the definitions and the categorisation of “benefits” in adult education research.
- To document and interpret the benefits learners perceive from participation in liberal adult education in 10 European countries.
- To differentiate these findings for different groups of participants with respect to gender, age, employment status, type and subject of the course.
- To describe the relationships between the reported benefits of liberal adult education and the characteristics of the learning course, such as the topic, teaching methods, learner groups, teaching styles, learning cultures and the teachers’ personalities, and to develop from this hypotheses on the institutional conditions associated with the individual and societal benefits.
- To expand the knowledge base on liberal adult education in general and on the respective liberal adult education landscapes in the 10 European countries participating in the project, and to interpret findings on the perceived benefits of learning against this background.

## 2. Project Approach

The BeLL study brought together European public and private research institutes, universities, NGOs and umbrella organisations on a project that, for the first time, used a common working model to conduct research on the topic of the wider benefits of liberal adult education. In examining the wider benefits of learning fourteen categories of benefits were defined, operationalised and used in fieldwork and reporting: (1) Locus of Control; (2) Self-efficacy; (3) Tolerance; (4) Trust; (5) Social networks; (6) Sense of Purpose in Life; (7) Civic and social engagement; (8) Civic competence; (9) Mental well-being; (10) Physical health; (11) Health behaviour; (12) Work-related benefits; (13) Family; and (14) Changes in educational experiences. In qualitative analysis an additional benefit category of “Skills and competencies” was used.

In order to meet the research objectives outlined in Section 1, the BeLL study used the research approach, project design and methods outlined below.

The research approach was empirical, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods (mixed-methods) to investigate the perceived benefits of participation in liberal adult education. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods had the purpose of complementarity – different types of data provided possibilities for elaboration, enhancement, illustration and clarification of the results and were meant to test the validity of data collection, results and interpretations.

During the **quantitative phase** of the study, adults who had participated in liberal education in the previous 12 months completed either a paper or web-based survey about the learning they had engaged in and the benefits they perceived that they had gained from this learning. The BeLL questionnaire (BeLL<sup>Q</sup>) was developed during initial desk-based research, with the project team drawing on previous empirical studies, a wide literature review, and expert input from within the consortium, including key contributions from Prof. Dr. Monika Kil and Dr. Bettina Thöne-Geyer (German Institute for Adult Education), Prof. Dr. Jyri Manninen (University of Eastern Finland) and Dr John Vorhaus (Institute of Education, London, UK). An iterative process of communication and revision between the project partners ensured that the research instrument met scientific standards and that its content could be adapted to the needs of a Europe-wide study. During this process the model of fourteen benefit categories was developed.

Given the variation in how liberal adult education is organised and delivered in the 10 partner countries, it was not possible to use a random sampling method to select survey respondents; instead a “convenience sampling” method was adopted which could allow for some country-specific modifications. Adult education providers distributed paper questionnaires to learners; web links were either sent directly to learners or published through adult learning organisations. As the nature of the BeLL study was to a large extent explorative, in that it aimed to gather and to elucidate all

the known wider benefits within the relatively under researched field of adult education, “convenience sampling” represented the best means to target active adult learners in liberal adult education. The impact of this sampling process is that no direct comparisons between countries can be drawn from the data. However, the BeLL study gathered a large body of data and provided wide explorative insights into the experiences and perceptions of benefits across the sample.

Statistical analyses of the quantitative data were carried out with SPSS-19.0 and MPlus 6.0 programmes and in several phases using different statistical procedures: confirmatory factor analysis, sum score measuring, t-test and one-way variance analysis (ANOVA), covariance analysis (ANCOVA) and a structural equation model (SEM).

Two open response questions – (1) What immediate outcomes, if any, have you noticed from your participation in learning?; (2) What other outcomes, long term effects or changes have you noticed? – were included in the BeLL<sup>Q</sup>. The purpose here was to collect spontaneous responses about the outcomes learners experienced and any changes in their lives that they felt could be attributed to their participating in learning. A total of 4, 443 respondents answers to the two open questions were analysed with qualitative content analysis. This provided additional information and also a more in-depth picture of the benefits. Although this analysis uncovered no new categories of benefits, the existing categories were enriched. The subcategories built up by the content analyses also guided the qualitative analysis of the interview material.

In addition to these data analysis processes, survey results were discussed in a Survey Feedback process. Project partners reviewed the findings with staff (managers, teachers and trainers, administrators) from one or two adult education providers within each individual country. The outcome of this was a comprehensive Survey Feedback Report.

During the **qualitative phase** of the study, 82 semi-structured interviews (eight per country, excepting Spain, where there were 10) were conducted with adults who had participated in liberal adult education courses. The aims of the qualitative data collection and analysis were:

- To reach a more in-depth understanding of benefits of learning examined in the quantitative survey;
- To enrich the quantitative data with additional information on individual learning processes, and on the development, identification and interaction of the reported benefits in respondents’ lives;
- To study the development of the benefits within the courses, and the relationship between course characteristics and benefits;
- To investigate the connections between different benefits;

- To identify external criteria (such as number of visits to museums, or participation in community events) which could be used to observe the benefits of learning; and,
- To complement the quantitative results.

During data analysis a systematic, stage-wise process and continuous reflection among the research teams were used to ensure that a comparable approach was applied across the countries. Each interviewee had participated in the quantitative survey and volunteered to take part in a qualitative interview. A common procedure was followed in each country, with the use of a common interview guide and list of benefits identified and defined during the first research phase.

Whereas the survey provided information about the *degree* to which participants view adult learning courses as beneficial, the qualitative interviews provided “rich” information about the perceived benefits and about what liberal adult education courses actually *mean* to learners: how the courses in which they participated fitted into their life history, what (precise and specific) reasons led them to participating, and how the benefits developed. In terms of the research strategy, the qualitative interviews aimed to *complement* the survey data with rich and unstandardised data, thereby producing a deeper and more nuanced picture of the participants in adult learning courses and the benefits of this learning. The interviews were an effective way of uncovering this information, as they gave the participants the opportunity to talk about their experiences and the personal changes they felt they had undergone. This process also allowed the research team to identify indicators and external criteria to demonstrate that the changes “ticked” in the questionnaires could be substantiated using descriptions of changes in behaviour.

**Quality assurance:** Quality assurance in the BeLL study was based on different approaches. The scientific standards of various elements in the research process, including the data collection instruments and the analytic process, were ensured by close collaboration among the consortium. In addition to the official partner meetings, a series of “Skype” and face-to face meetings was organised by the project’s coordinator to implement and accompany the research process.

An external expert was subcontracted to provide an evaluation of the study and give feedback on the project outputs and the research process itself.

Another critical point for the success of the BeLL study was the organisation of the different research steps and their practical implementation within a research consortium of 10 partners. An internal evaluator (Partner 4 ATHENA from Czech Republic) led two internal feedback sessions (on the management and internal communication process and on the cooperation between partners) ensuring that the needs and contributions of all partners were taken into account. This project step was a very valuable support for the management when adjusting the respective tasks.

**Dissemination and exploitation of the results:** See below.



## 3. Project Results & Outcomes

### 3.1 Project Results

The BeLL study findings are drawn from analysis of two data sources:

- a quantitative survey (n=8, 646), which included both structured questions with respondents rating statements on a Likert scale and two open questions on the benefits of liberal adult education courses.
- 82 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in the 10 participating European countries.

The BeLL study found that individuals who participate in liberal adult education report multiple benefits to themselves as individuals from this participation. Participation in learning also led adult learners to report impacts on their immediate social groups including those in the family, in the work place, and in other social networks, demonstrating that liberal adult education can generate benefits for wider society as well the individual.

Of the 8, 646 respondents to the quantitative survey, 70-87% experienced positive changes in learning motivation, social interaction, general well-being and life satisfaction. Less frequently respondents experienced changes related to work and career and to active citizenship, but even here 31-42% of respondents reported experiencing some positive changes. Qualitative analysis of open questions included in the survey (n=4, 443) showed that people are able to recognise, name and describe these benefits.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from analysis of the qualitative interview data:

- Most participants in liberal adult education can spontaneously identify the benefits of their learning in more than one category, although there are also benefits participants only become aware of when asked to discuss their experiences.
- Participants are able to recognise and reflect on their learning experiences and to articulate direct benefits as well as the wider benefits and longer-term effects of their learning.
- Participants generally report groups of benefits rather than single benefits.
- Interviews highlight the importance of benefits related to social interaction and social networks as well as those related to individual wellbeing and life satisfaction.
- Participants make connections between the benefits of learning and their individual life contexts, and they interpret the contextual meaning of the benefits very differently.

- Interviewees identify the teachers'/trainers' personality, expertise and their teaching approaches as important factors in the benefits they derive from the course of learning.

Data analysis also uncovered variations in the benefits of learning that were related to the characteristics of the learner. Most significantly, comparing the reported benefits by educational background, the study found that the lower the educational level of the respondent, the more positive changes the learner attributed to participation in liberal adult education in terms of motivation to learn, recognition of adult education as an important opportunity, confidence as a learner, and desire to encourage others to participate in learning. These changes were greatest in the group where educational background is at ISCED 1 or lower level (primary education, or first stage of basic education, or less). Moreover, lower educated people experience more positive changes in other benefits, in other words, they benefit more from participation. This finding may be due to the fact that more highly educated respondents are more likely to have a better control of their own life, are more able to support their children's learning, have better health etc., and therefore participation in adult education does not generate the same degree of change in their life as it does for people with lower educational levels. The data suggest that respondents with lower levels of education appear to need more support from their teacher and their learner group. They view the different characteristics of the learning situation as more important to the development of benefits than those who have better educational background and therefore better learning skills. It will be important for future research to investigate whether liberal adult education can serve to narrow the gaps between social groups in terms of learning opportunities and motivation it offers.

There were also variations related to the age of respondents. For younger participants, liberal adult education serves as a "stepping stone" into society, improving their sense of control over their life. For older participants, learning has a "cushioning" effect, protecting them from age-related changes in their lives like retirement, loss of friends and family members, and skills decline.

The BeLL research report (<http://www.bell-project.eu/outcomes.html>) presents the overall findings of the study as well as the national results.

### **3.2 Project Outcomes**

#### *Templates and guidelines*

The templates and guidelines for data collection and analysis produced in the BeLL project include:

- Guidelines for data collection (criteria for selecting organisations, courses and respondents for the survey).

- A data input template for data collected using paper questionnaires, to secure full comparability with data from the web questionnaires which were stored automatically.
- Guidelines and codes for qualitative content analysis of the two open response questions in the quantitative survey.
- An Excel template for analysis of these open response questions (which also enabled quantification of the themes).
- Guidelines and definitions of the open question measuring importance and role of elements of the learning situation for the development of benefits
- An Excel template for analysis of the above-mentioned open question
- Guidelines and definitions for the classification of course topics.
- Guidelines for the semi-structured interviews, including interview questions.
- Guidelines, templates and a code system for the analysis of interview data.

### *Project meetings*

Four project meetings were held during the life of the project, which aimed:

- To describe in detail the liberal adult education landscape in the BeLL countries and to elaborate a common understanding of the field as well as the purpose, the theoretical background and the methodological approach of the BeLL study.
- To discuss the research process and the preliminary results (questionnaire piloting and first analysis of qualitative data) and to adjust research instruments (BeLL-questionnaire, data collection, Survey Feedback guidelines, interview guidelines; guidelines for analysis, templates) in light of these results;
- To discuss and interpret the main stage research results.

In addition to the four face-to-face project meetings the whole consortium and smaller sub-group task forces held a series of project meetings via “Skype”. A communication platform in GoogleGroups was used for project management, discussions and file sharing. In addition, email and telephone communication was an integral part of the project implementation.

### *The BeLL<sup>Q</sup>*

The BeLL questionnaire (BeLL<sup>Q</sup>) was developed and tested in a pilot study during the first phase of the project. The questionnaire contained 35 statements, each of which represented one of the 14 benefit concepts: *Locus of Control, Self-efficacy, Tolerance, Trust, Social Networks, Sense of Purpose in Life, Civic and Social Engagement, Civic Competence, Mental Well-being, Work-related Benefits, Physical Health, Health Behaviour, Family, and Changes in Educational Experiences*. To mitigate any possible social desirability bias (the tendency of respondents to give

socially desirable responses) four control statements from a tested instrument were added to the survey.

### *The Research Report (“Final Publication”)*

The BeLL study investigated the wider benefits of liberal adult education in 10 European countries. The BeLL *research report* presents the study’s aims, its theoretical and thematic background, its methodology and its findings, including both the main overall quantitative and qualitative results on the European level and the individual reports on the 10 BeLL countries. These country reports are situated against the background of data and information collected about the landscapes of adult education in that country.

### *A structural equation model on the relationship between benefits of liberal adult learning*

The structural equation model is based on the analyses of the survey data. The model shows the interrelation between the development of single benefits within liberal adult education and underlines the importance of learning as a shared activity for the development of the benefits.

### *Supporting documents*

In addition to the final research report, three supporting documents were created: a report on the quantitative (survey), a report on the qualitative (interviews) research, and a report on the national Survey Feedback processes which supported the assessment of the research results. These documents form a strong foundation for future publications.

### *Presentations*

- Adult education organisations as well as umbrella institutions were involved in the project from a very early stage due to the support needed during the data collection. (Each country was required to collect 1000 completed questionnaires and eight qualitative interviews.) Adult educators from the institutions were informed about the study and the wider benefits of learning approach. This effect of building networks for support and discussion was extended during the Survey Feedback sessions where BeLL researchers discussed preliminary results and their possible use in everyday professional practice with adult education managers, marketing and planning staff, teachers and trainers, and learners. These project activities increased awareness of the benefits of adult education and established a basis for the reception and exploitation of the BeLL results. Furthermore, BeLL researchers, mainly through conferences, established a dialogue with practitioners in related professional fields such as educational counselling as well as adult education stakeholders. Preliminary results were presented at the European Adult Education Conference which took place in Vilnius (9-10 December 2013). Dialogue and networks established on these occasions will continue. Moreover, BeLL results were discussed together with results from

smaller studies of benefits in various scientific articles and papers (Schmidt-Lauff/Fleige 2014; see also Fleige 2013, 2014) and the AES (Schrader 2014).

- The BeLL project and its preliminary results were presented and discussed at various international and national conferences, including the 7th conference of the European Society for Research on the Education for Adults (ESREA) which was held in Berlin on 4-7 September 2013. Through this, a network of experts and researchers interested in the wider benefits of adult education was established and will be developed in the future.
- The “Promotion/Advocacy Event” was launched in Brussels on 27 January 2014. About 30 European politicians, members of the EU Commission, and stakeholders participated. The event was organised by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), the BeLL consortium’s partner for the dissemination of the project results. The BeLL project and its main findings were presented by Dr. Marion Fleige (German Institute for Adult Education, coordinator) and Prof. Dr. Jyri Manninen (University of Eastern Finland). Prior to this event, the BeLL study and preliminary results were presented at a conference on Awareness Raising for Adult Learning and Education (ARALE) organised by EAEA in Brussels, 2-3 October 2013.

#### *Project website*

A project website ([www.bell-project.eu](http://www.bell-project.eu)) was created at the project’s outset and developed and updated over the life of the study. The purpose of the website was threefold: to communicate the aims, theoretical and thematic background, and methodological approach of the study; to provide insights into the challenges experienced by the project team via a project Blog (“News about BeLL”); to communicate the project findings and results. A series of articles, press releases and selected presentations is available on the website and will be updated throughout 2014.

#### *Further dissemination of outcomes*

In addition to the study’s website, international and national dissemination activities to date have included conference papers, articles in daily newspapers and in adult education and scientific journals as well as a project website leaflet. Project partners communicated the findings to experts and stakeholders in their respective countries. Through this, the consortium aimed to reach three different target groups in adult education: practitioners, researchers and policy-makers. The dissemination outcomes included:

- Articles in scientific journals: the consortium has produced twelve articles in scientific journals which introduce the project, its aims and background and which disseminate and discuss preliminary and final results. Further articles based on two supporting deliverables – one detailed report on the analysis of the quantitative data and one on the analysis of the qualitative data – are being drafted. The BeLL study thus met the minimum target for publications

set out in the project proposal (10 articles) within the life of the project, and will exceed this target in the coming months. Articles will be written/published according to the intellectual property rights elaborated and agreed by all consortium partners.

- Articles in daily newspapers: a number of articles in daily newspapers in the BeLL partner countries were published.
- A leaflet was designed to present the main results and the political recommendations emerging from the BeLL study. While the leaflet itself is English extra information sheets appended to it contain information on the specific national results in the respective languages.
- More than 50 people from different areas of adult education attended the “Results and Dissemination Workshop” held in Bonn, 23 January 2014. Researchers, practitioners, political stakeholders, members of national ministries from the BeLL countries, and representatives of national and international umbrella organisations, discussed the results of the BeLL study and the political recommendations formulated by the research consortium. Various articles in adult education journals (DIE Zeitschrift, Erwachsenenbildung, Adult Infonet) published information about the workshop and its outcomes.

Further information on dissemination is appended to the final report.

#### *Policy recommendations*

Policy recommendations were formulated to revitalise dialogue with policy makers on the importance of liberal adult education and to deliver arguments based on empirical research for policy makers within the area of adult education.

## 4. Partnerships

Between them, the BeLL partner organisations have a wide range of experience and expertise in different aspects of conducting research studies, including quantitative and qualitative research methods, fieldwork and analysis, project management, evaluation and dissemination. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the BeLL project's consortium partners and their affiliations.

**Table 4.1: The BeLL Project consortium**

Country	Partner organisation
Czech Republic	ATHENA – Association for Education and Development of Women
Finland	University of Eastern Finland (UEF)
Germany (coordinator)	German Institute for Adult Education – Leibniz Centre of Lifelong Learning (DIE)
Italy	Associazione di donne Orlando (AddO)
Romania	Romanian Institute for Adult Education (IREA)
Serbia (silent partner)	Adult Education Society (AES)
Slovenia	Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE)
Spain	Research Centre in Theories + Practices to Overcome Inequalities, University Barcelona (CREA-UB)
Switzerland	Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB)
United Kingdom	Institute of Education, University of London (IOE)

In addition to the ten national partners, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA, Brussels) was included in the consortium to lead on project dissemination. With 116 member organisations from 43 countries, the EAEA is a European NGO which works in the field of adult learning and represents more than 60 million learners across Europe.

The following descriptions of the ten partner organisations illustrate the breadth of expertise within the BeLL consortium.

The **ATHENA – Association for Education and Development of Women** is a non-profit association (NGO) and training institution based in the Czech Republic. Its collaboration with public institutions (Employment Office, national and regional umbrella organisations), with the Union of employers, the Union for the Development of the Region Moravia-Silesia, municipalities and schools allows ATHENA to collect information and data from various players in the labour market and in the field of training, education and consultancy, predominantly for adults. ATHENA is experienced at working in interdisciplinary contexts and networks and in project monitoring and evaluation.

The **University of Eastern Finland (UEF)** is the third biggest university in Finland. UEF's School of Educational Sciences and Psychology has adult education as one field of master's education and research. The special focus of its research themes is on civil and learning society, learning environments, wider benefits of lifelong learning and developmental evaluation. Research on liberal adult education is one of the key themes at the unit, including analyses of changing liberal adult education organisational structures, lifelong learning in different age cohorts, participation and wider benefits of learning.

The **German Institute for Adult Education – Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning (DIE)** is a central forum in the fields of research and practice of continuing education in Germany. It combines research and practice, provides data and information, and produces research and development work. As the leading national competence centre in the field of adult education, the DIE has formed close links with corresponding institutes across the EU and has extensively networked its activities internationally.

Established in 1982, the **Associazione di donne Orlando (AddO)** is a feminist organisation which aims to document research and promote women's actions, theories, arts and literature, and political presence in public life. The Centre comprises the Women's National Library and Archive, Gender Resources Centre (counselling, training service), Internet and ICT training and services. The Association is active in gender policies at local, national and international levels, is a member of several international and national networks, and has implemented actions of peace-mediation and support of the feminine civil society in conflict areas (Bosnia, Kosovo, Israeli/Palestine). Its action fields are research, teaching, counselling and political initiative. Its Training Sector has engaged in Lifelong Learning as well as Higher Education, through an agreement with the Bologna University.

The **Romanian Institute for Adult Education from Timisoara (IREA)** was funded in March 2000, as a pedagogical research institute aiming to provide scientific and methodological support for the adult education institutions and practitioners working in adult education in Romania. It acts as a link between academic theory and practical work, caring out ameliorative, participative, research and development projects etc. for the adult education sector.

The **Adult Education Society (AES)** is a national non-governmental organisation, registered in Belgrade/Serbia. It was founded in 2000 and includes professionals engaged in or interested in adult education. The AES acts both as a kind of think tank and as an implementing organisation for different projects – working either alone or with partners including peoples' and workers' universities, adult schools, cultural centres, NGOs, training departments in companies etc. The AES covers many fields of adult education and lifelong learning: basic education for adults, professional-vocational education, training and retraining, education for democratic citizenship, education of elderly people, modern methods and didactics of adult teaching and others.



The **Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE)** is the main national institution for research and development, quality and education, guidance and validation, and promotional and informative activities in the field of adult education. It was founded in 1991. SIAE drafts professional bases and evaluations, and monitors the development of the adult education system, develops various non-formal and formal forms of learning, develops programmes to improve adult literacy, and pays particular attention to improving the access of vulnerable adults to education and learning. In doing so, it develops the necessary infrastructure to support learning, develops models for the self-evaluation of quality and the validation of prior learning, and provides professional education and training for adult educators. The SIAE informs professionals and the general public about these processes and achievements, and contributes to the broader awareness of the importance and role of adult education.

The **Research Centre in Theories + Practices to Overcome Inequalities, University Barcelona (CREA-UB)** is currently formed by more than 70 professors and researchers from different universities around the world and from different disciplines: anthropology, biology, communication, economics, engineering, history, pedagogy, political sciences, psychology, sociology, and more. CREA-UB has coordinated many local, national and European research projects, such as the FP6 Integrated Project “INCLUD-ED. Strategies for Social Inclusion and Cohesion in Europe from Education” (2006-2011), and the FP5 Project “WORKALO: The creation of new occupational patterns for cultural minorities. The Gypsy case” (2001-2004). It is currently coordinating “IMPACT-EV: Evaluating the impact and outcomes of European SSH research”, under the FP7.

The **Swiss Federation of Adult Learning (SVEB)** is the national union (umbrella organisation) for general and vocational adult learning in Switzerland. It groups more than 670 members including private and state providers of adult education, associations, regional officials in charge of adult education, in-company adult learning departments and human resources staff, as well as individuals involved in adult learning. SVEB lobbies for a sustainable adult education system in Switzerland, raises awareness of the importance of adult learning and creating cooperation and networks among adult learning organisations by conducting national and international projects, conferences and informative meetings.

The **Institute of Education, University of London (IOE)** is the world’s leading centre for education (2014 QS World University Rankings), also topping the league table for education research, according to the latest official audit of UK universities. Based at the IOE, the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) is the national independent centre for adult literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages. NRDC was established by the UK government in 2002 as part of Skills for Life, the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills in England. NRDC has undertaken projects for a wide range of funders including the (then) Department for Children,

Schools and Families, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the European Commission, and the OECD.

*Further partnerships*

The dissemination and exploitation strategy described in Section 3 helped to inspire a better understanding about the importance of liberal adult education in terms of its potential to contribute to adult wellbeing, active citizenship, and lifelong learning, especially in a time of multiple societal challenges. A dialogue and network with practitioners, researchers and policy-makers in liberal adult education was built and will be maintained. Moreover, a close working relationship was established with the Danube University Krems (Austria), the University for Continuing Education, which will continue in further research activities. Similar cooperation activities are being developed with other researchers and universities in the field.

## **5. Plans for the Future**

The unique data gathered by the BeLL study and its extensive analysis suggest further dissemination and exploitation activities.

In the short term (2014-2015), the main targets of the BeLL team are to continue to present the BeLL findings at national and international adult education conferences and to publish articles based on these findings in scientific journals. A number of articles are currently being prepared for relevant publications, including two peer-reviewed journals. Additional articles are planned which will focus on: a) the benefits of liberal adult education to specific target groups, including older people and lower qualified persons, and b) the relationship between the characteristics of the learning situation and the development of benefits as well as consequences for professional pedagogical action at different professional levels. All partner organisations will publish at least one article introducing the BeLL study and its results in a national journal.

In the longer term (from 2014 onwards), it is anticipated that the dialogue and cooperation established among the consortium partners, as well as the networks built up during the project together with other researchers and adult education organisations interested in the wider benefits of adult education, will form the basis of further research proposals. The future research agenda is likely to focus on the relationships between participation in liberal adult education and the benefits to health and wellbeing, and in turn on the opportunities and challenges these relationships present for programme planning and marketing.

## 6. Contribution to EU policies and European added value

The BeLL project was linked to several EU policy objectives, especially in respect of the follow-up indicators of the Lisbon strategy and new Europe 2020 strategy.

The main overarching policy objectives to which the project contributed include:

- The collection of trans-European data on the adult education sector to monitor the multiplicity of adult learning and to develop evidence-based policies;
- The achievement for a better insight and understanding into the benefits of adult learning.

Compared to compulsory education, data on adult education are limited, not least because providers are dispersed, of different natures and often outside the public sector. Reliable data are required in order to monitor the multiplicity of adult learning and to develop evidence-based policies. The Communication from the European Commission, Adult learning: “It is always a good time to learn” (2007) mentions that the failure to demonstrate the benefits of adult learning is a major weakness of the field. It is also pointed out that there is an urgent need for a common understanding to overcome the lack of comparable data in the sector. The Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (2011) invites all Member States to improve their knowledge base on adult learning, especially in collecting sufficient baseline data on the wider benefits of learning to adults and society. In-depth analysis of issues relating to adult learning is required, but also analyses on the impact of the development and performance of the adult education sector in Europe.

As the first European project to investigate all the benefits of liberal adult education, the empirical data set generated by the BeLL study was unique, providing insights not only into the effects of adult learning, but also on the liberal adult education landscape in 10 European countries. Moreover, the research focused on the connection between different aspects of learning provision (e.g. the role of the teacher, the group, the methods etc.) and the development of the wider benefits of learning. The study improved the knowledge base on liberal adult learning and due to its explorative nature the BeLL study produced a number of benefit indicators to aid further assessment of the liberal adult education sector. Although the investigation of the social as well as the individual benefits of adult learning is increasingly recognised both by European institutions and also supranational institutions like the OECD, this specific approach is still uncommon and was unknown in most of the BeLL countries. The BeLL study closed this gap and provided a theoretical framework as well as an empirical basis for an improved understanding of the wider benefits of liberal adult education; in turn, recognition of this part of the adult education sector increased. The results also contributed to current discussion of learning outcomes and recognition of skills and competences. Furthermore the BeLL findings provided evidence-based arguments to guide political decisions in this area of adult learning. From the perspective of adult learners, equity, social cohesion and

active citizenship are enhanced through participation in liberal adult education courses. At the very least the BeLL study's findings will stimulate further research.

On the basis of the BeLL results, the BeLL consortium makes the following recommendations:

1. The important role of liberal adult education and its wide range of course topics and types as part of Lifelong Learning system should be better recognised at national and European policy level.
2. The impact of the social environment in which learning takes place has to be acknowledged by training organisers and adult educators. The learners in the BeLL sample place a high value on the social aspects of course participation, with improved social networks high among the benefits identified.
3. Further research on the wider benefits of adult learning should be encouraged. For example, the OECD should consider the addition of questions on participation in liberal adult education activities to future rounds of its Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).
4. Awareness-raising actions on the BeLL findings about the positive impact of learning should be addressed to employers and social partners in order to encourage them to facilitate such learning for their employers/members.
5. Public investment in learning for adults, and in liberal adult education in particular, should be increased.

