

Ljudska univerza and Lifelong Learning: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

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Abstract

The adult education system embodies a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, placing adult learners at the heart of inclusive, flexible, and skill-oriented educational frameworks. These frameworks are designed to foster resilience and sustainability in 21st-century societies. Once regarded as supplementary or remedial, adult education has evolved over centuries of social, economic, and political transformations to become a vital pillar of modern educational systems. As the global education landscape undergoes rapid change, the significance of non-formal adult education is receiving renewed attention due to demographic shifts, digital innovation, labor market volatility, and the growing need for lifelong learning.

This paper examines non-formal adult education through the lens of Ljudska univerza (Adult Education Centre, AEC) in Slovenia—an institution with a long-standing tradition of providing accessible, community-based learning for adults. By exploring the historical foundations, current practices, and future directions of adult education in Slovenia, this paper highlights how small institutions can play a crucial role in shaping the future of education—one that values not only systems but people, not only degrees but personal growth.

Keywords: Adult education, lifelong learning, education in Slovenia, history of education, non-formal education

1. Introduction

Education is the process of acquiring knowledge, skills and values through teaching, training, researching or experience. Its primary function is to support individuals in realizing their potential, understand the world around them, and preparing for various personal and societal roles. In today's rapidly evolving world, education can no longer be confined to childhood or adolescence. Adult education, as a distinct yet essential branch of the global educational landscape, provides opportunities to acquire new skills, deepen knowledge and foster personal growth across the lifespan. With growing global recognition of the importance of lifelong learning, adult education has gained credibility and visibility in policy, practice and research.

Adult education encompasses organized learning activities designed for individuals beyond traditional school age, typically 18 and older. It is a dynamic force for personal empowerment, community strengthening, and societal advancement. It exists in several forms:

- Formal education: structured learning within schools and universities, complete with curricula, assessments, and certification.
- Non-formal education: organized learning outside traditional institutions, such as community programs, workshops, and workplace training.
- Informal education: unstructured learning occurring through daily life experiences or self-directed study.

These learning forms may focus on a range of goals including basic literacy, professional development, civic engagement, and cultural enrichment. Key features of adult education include voluntary participation, approaches focused on learner, and contextual relevance to the learner's life. Non-formal education in particular responds flexibly to adult learners' needs through adaptable, context-specific programs.

1.2. Historical Overview of Adult Education

To fully understand the concept of adult education, it is essential to explore its rich and evolving history, which stretches from ancient times to the modern era. The origins of adult education can be

traced to ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, where education was primarily reserved for elites. Philosophers such as Socrates and Plato engaged adults in public discourse, laying the foundations for critical thinking and civic education.

In many cultures, religious institutions played a key role in adult education by providing instruction in reading scriptures and delivering moral teachings. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, monks preserved and taught classical knowledge, although this education was largely limited to the clergy. Meanwhile, adults often learned trades through structured apprenticeships, hands-on experience, and oral instruction from masters.

The invention of the printing press marked a turning point in knowledge dissemination, significantly expanding access to literacy and learning. The Age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution (18th and 19th century) saw adult education expand to include topics such as science, politics, and economics. Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau promoted self-education and the pursuit of reason. The growing importance of technical education for working-class men led to increased support for adult learning through public lectures and debates.

Evening schools began to appear in industrial cities, providing education to factory workers. Popular universities and workers' associations emerged in France, Germany, and Scandinavia, offering lectures, libraries, and evening classes accessible to broader segments of the population. In Germany and Austria, adult education was centered around the Volkshochschulen, institutions that emphasized civic and cultural education.

The two World Wars disrupted educational development, but by 1945, adult education gained renewed global recognition. UNESCO played a pivotal role in promoting adult learning on a global scale. The concept of lifelong learning took root, emphasizing that education should continue throughout an individual's life.

In the 21st century, rapid technological advancements gave rise to online learning platforms, including e-learning tools, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), and mobile applications. These innovations have greatly expanded access to knowledge, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which further accelerated digital education.

2. Adult Education in Slovenia – Yesterday

Adult education in Slovenia reflects a complex interplay of tradition and transformation. The country's trajectory—from Austro-Hungarian rule, through Yugoslav federalism, to membership in the European Union—has significantly shaped its educational philosophy and structures.

Slovenian adult education began to take form during the Enlightenment era in the 18th and 19th century, initially emphasizing basic literacy and religious instruction. Early milestones included:

- Parish Schools, managed by the Church, which provided basic reading and writing instruction to adults.
- Reforms of Emperor Joseph II, which expanded educational access to wider segments of society, including adult learners.
- 19th-Century Reading Societies, which emerged as civic associations promoting the Slovenian language, culture, and literacy among adults.

During the interwar period under the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, adult education was fragmented but persisted through cultural societies and worker education programs supported by trade unions and socialist organizations.

In the Socialist Yugoslav era, adult education became a state priority and a key tool for modernization. Widespread efforts were made to eradicate illiteracy in the post-World War II period. Education was closely tied to workplace needs and self-managed communities, emphasizing both technical knowledge and ideological training. Ljudske univerze (Adult Education Centres, AECs) were established across Slovenia to deliver a broad spectrum of adult education services—ranging from vocational training to cultural and political education. These institutions continue to operate today and remain central to the adult learning infrastructure, especially in non-formal education.

At this stage, the state recognized non-formal education as a tool for both modernization and equity. Programs were subsidized through local governments and workplaces, making education more accessible to a wide range of adults.

With Slovenia's independence in 1991, the adult education system underwent significant reform to align with democratic values and market-based principles. Decentralization and market liberalization required Ljudske univerze (AECs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to adapt to competitive funding models and evolving learner needs.

The Adult Education Act (1996) established a modern legal framework for adult education, and the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE), founded in 1991, took on a key role in policy coordination, research, and innovation. The focus of adult education shifted toward employability, civic participation, and personal development.

Slovenia's accession to the European Union in 2004 further accelerated reforms. European frameworks such as the European Qualifications Framework, European Skills Agenda, and the Upskilling Pathways Initiative guided national strategies. The validation of non-formal learning, digital learning opportunities, and outreach to underrepresented groups all became central themes in the evolving adult education landscape of Slovenia.

3. Adult Education in Slovenia – Today

Today, Slovenia's non-formal adult education landscape is dynamic, diverse, and responsive to both national priorities and local community needs. It plays an essential role in equipping adults with skills, knowledge, and competencies required for personal development, social integration, and labor market participation.

Key features of the current system include:

- **Community-Based Learning:** Local learning centers, libraries, and municipalities offer a wide range of programs focused on languages, digital skills, sustainability, and active citizenship. Intergenerational learning initiatives, in particular, promote solidarity and social cohesion across age groups.
- **NGO and Third-Sector Involvement:** Civil society organizations play a vital role in delivering education to marginalized and underrepresented groups such as Roma communities, migrants, and older adults. These organizations often tailor programs to specific local and cultural contexts, enhancing accessibility and inclusion.
- **Workplace Learning:** This area of non-formal education is expanding, as companies increasingly invest in upskilling and reskilling their workforce. These initiatives are frequently co-funded by national programs or EU projects, reinforcing the connection between lifelong learning and economic competitiveness.
- **Digital and Online Learning:** Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, digital learning has become a major component of adult education in Slovenia. The development of online platforms, blended learning models, and the growing availability of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and open educational resources have significantly expanded access to learning opportunities.

The Ministry of Education serves as the primary authority overseeing adult education policy. It collaborates closely with the Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities to align educational initiatives with labor market needs. The Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE) acts as a key intermediary, connecting policy with practice. It is responsible for developing guidelines, coordinating awareness campaigns, such as Lifelong Learning Week, and facilitating cooperation among various education providers.

A broad array of programs is delivered by a mix of public and private providers. These range from basic education and digital literacy to social inclusion and employment-oriented training. Many of these initiatives are supported by national funds and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), with content adapted to local contexts and learner needs.

3.1. Ljudska univerza (Adult Educational Center)

Ljudske univerze (Adult education centers, AECs) have been foundational institutions in Slovenia's non-formal adult education system. With a history rooted in the early 20th century, they have continuously evolved to provide accessible, community-based learning. Originally established to educate working-class and rural populations, their early activities were closely linked to workers' movements and cultural associations.

Over time, these centers expanded their offerings to include literacy programs, vocational training, cultural enrichment, and civic education. After Slovenia's independence in 1991, Ljudske univerze (AECs) adapted to new social and economic conditions by becoming more professionalized and diversified in their program delivery. They retained their commitment to accessibility and community development while aligning with modern labor market demands.

Today, more than 30 AECs operate across Slovenia, each functioning as a local hub for non-formal education. Their services primarily support vulnerable populations such as the unemployed, older adults, migrants, low-skilled workers, and people with disabilities. These learners are often underserved by formal education systems.

AECs complement traditional educational institutions by offering flexible, short-term, and demand-driven learning opportunities. Their contributions to Slovenia's educational landscape include:

- **Promoting Social Cohesion:** By providing inclusive education rooted in local communities.
- **Fostering Employability:** Through vocational training, skills development, and career guidance.
- **Supporting Lifelong Learning:** By encouraging continuous personal and professional growth.
- **Ensuring Educational Decentralization:** By making learning accessible in rural and less-developed regions.

Common program offerings include:

- Basic and continuing education for adults without formal qualifications.
- Language courses for both citizens and migrants.
- Digital literacy and media education.
- Career counseling and employment support.
- Civic education, personal development, and intergenerational learning activities.

The work of AECs is closely aligned with EU strategies such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Upskilling Pathways Initiative, particularly through national and European project funding. These institutions are increasingly recognized as essential platforms for promoting lifelong learning, especially for marginalized groups.

Many AECs also participate in the national ISIO network (Informativno-svetovalna dejavnost v izobraževanju odraslih) through the operation of Svetovalno središče (Adult Education Guidance Centre, AEGC). These centers provide free, confidential, and tailored support to individuals looking to enhance their qualifications, upskill for the labor market, or pursue personal development goals. Established in the early 2000s by the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE), these advisory centers now operate as a national network integrated within 35 adult education organizations. Their model includes regular monitoring, self-assessment, and responsiveness to local, regional, and national needs.

Another key program implemented by AECs is PUM-O+ (Projektno učenje mlajših odraslih Plus - Project Learning for Young Adults, PLYA), a non-formal education initiative for young adults aged 15 to 29 who are unemployed and have not completed their formal education. Through project-based learning, workshops, and mentorship, PUM-O+ (PLYA) supports participants in personal growth, social integration, and re-entry into education or the labor market. The program allows flexible participation (up to 10 months) and includes support services like career counseling and confidence-building activities.

Equally important is the Temeljne kompetence 2023–2029 (Basic Competences 2023–2029) project, which aims to improve adults' foundational skills. Co-financed by the European Social Fund Plus and the Slovenian Ministry of Education, the project supports lifelong learning, employability, and social inclusion. AECs implement these programs through flexible and individually tailored learning paths. The initiative specifically targets low-educated adults, older individuals, migrants, and incarcerated persons—ensuring access for those who need it the most.

3.2. Ljudska univerza Murska Sobota (Adult Educational Centre Murska Sobota)

Ljudska univerza Murska Sobota (LUMS) has served as a pillar of adult education in northeastern Slovenia for over six decades. Founded in 1960 as Delavska univerza (Workers' Adult Education Center) by the Municipal People's Assembly, LUMS was initially established to provide accessible education to rural women and working-class adults, groups historically excluded from formal education systems.

From the outset, LUMS filled critical educational gaps by offering literacy courses, basic education, and practical skills to adults living in rural and remote areas. By the 1970s and 1980s, the institution underwent formal restructuring and expansion. It broadened its mission to include workplace training, cultural programming, and early forms of vocational education. This evolution marked the beginning of its role in continuing education and labor market preparedness.

Despite economic challenges during the post-socialist transition period, LUMS remained a relevant and vital institution. Its 1995 renaming to Ljudska univerza Murska Sobota reflected a broader vision aligned with lifelong learning principles. In the 2000s, LUMS began embracing project-based funding models and international collaboration, leading to an expanded portfolio that included digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and cognitive skills development.

Today, LUMS plays a strategic role in regional development through a wide array of programs focused on inclusion, education, and skills development. It is deeply embedded in the community and serves as a model of resilience and adaptability in the field of non-formal adult education.

Svetovalno središče (Adult Education Guidance Centre, AEGC)

The Svetovalno središče at LUMS is part of the national ISIO network and represents the main advisory hub for adult education in the Pomurje region. It plays a central role in aligning educational offerings with the regional labor market and local community needs. The center provides inclusive services to all adults, regardless of employment status or prior education, and has earned a reputation for supporting equitable access to lifelong learning.

Recognizing the importance of accessibility, Svetovalno središče extends its reach through mobile counseling units, delivering on-site educational guidance to remote and underserved areas. This model has proven effective in removing barriers and increasing educational participation across the region.

PUM-O+

LUMS is an active implementer of the PUM-O+ (PLYA) program in partnership with the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE) and the Employment Service of Slovenia. The initiative supports young people aged 15 to 29 who are out of school and unemployed, offering them a structured yet flexible environment for re-engaging with education and developing life and career skills. PUM-O+ at LUMS is built around project-based learning, creativity, and social inclusion, tailored to each participant's unique background and aspirations.

Temeljne kompetence 2023–2029

LUMS also leads the Temeljne kompetence 2023–2029 (Basic Competences 2023–2029) project in the Pomurje region, coordinating a consortium of five institutions. This initiative aims to improve fundamental competences among adults, particularly those from vulnerable groups, by offering flexible, accessible programs focused on literacy, digital skills, language learning, and personal

development. As the lead partner, LUMS ensures that the project reaches diverse participants across the region and meets the overarching goals of increased participation in lifelong learning, employability, and active citizenship.

From practice to theory – lessons for the Future

The history and ongoing work of LUMS illustrate several key lessons for the future of adult education. Its success can be attributed to its local grounding and global outlook—adapting international trends to the specific needs of its community. Its commitment to flexibility, resilience, and innovation ensures that programs remain relevant and impactful.

A defining feature of LUMS's approach is its integration of technology without compromising the human element of education. It exemplifies how digital transformation can coexist with personalized learning, maintaining a strong connection to the lived experiences of adult learners.

4. Adult Education in Slovenia – Tomorrow

Education is not only a fundamental right but also a social necessity—particularly in remote and rural regions. As Europe moves toward more flexible, inclusive, and learner-centered education systems, Ljudske univerze (AECs) are uniquely positioned to lead innovative approaches in adult education. These institutions have contributed significantly to Slovenian society by championing non-formal education, and their potential for continued impact remains strong.

In the context of societal resilience and economic adaptation, lifelong learning is becoming central to policy agendas across Europe. The future of adult education calls for systems that are flexible, inclusive, and designed to support individuals throughout their lives. Slovenia's AECs are ideally placed to support this transformation, given their strong community roots, longstanding experience, and engagement with diverse learners.

Despite their critical role, AECs face several persistent challenges:

- Unstable, project-based funding that limits long-term planning.
- Low participation rates among specific demographic groups.
- Limited recognition of non-formal education outcomes, which hinders learners' mobility and career advancement.
- Constant pressure for rapid adaptation and innovation, often without adequate institutional support.

In parallel, megatrends are reshaping the education landscape in Slovenia and beyond:

- Digitalization is accelerating the demand for skills in remote work, digital literacy, and cybersecurity across all generations.
- Demographic changes, including aging populations and migration, necessitate adaptable and inclusive educational strategies.
- Green transition is emerging as a new direction in education, requiring the integration of sustainability and environmental awareness.
- Labor market volatility, driven by automation and evolving business models, is increasing the need for continuous upskilling and reskilling.
- Equity and inclusion remain critical priorities, particularly in reaching marginalized groups and reducing learning disparities.

To address these challenges and seize emerging opportunities, AECs must pursue several strategic directions:

- Expanding digital learning modalities: Including blended and online learning platforms that allow greater flexibility.
- Strengthening local partnerships: Collaborating with employers, municipalities, and NGOs to tailor educational offerings to community needs.

- Enhancing public awareness: Using media and outreach campaigns to promote the value and impact of adult education.
- Integrating micro-credentials and digital badges: Providing modular certification that aligns with labor market needs and allows for stackable skill acquisition.
- Advancing learning personalization: Leveraging AI and data to tailor content to learners' goals and prior experience.
- Fostering community co-creation: Enabling learners, educators, employers, and civil society to co-design relevant and sustainable programs.
- Embedding sustainability: Integrating green skills into curricula and promoting climate-conscious learning.
- Developing intergenerational learning models: Creating programs that bridge youth and senior learning through shared educational activities.

To realize this vision, multi-level coordination is essential:

- Policy support: Ensuring secure, long-term funding and integrating adult learning into national strategies.
- Capacity building: Supporting educator training, digital infrastructure, and the development of innovation hubs.
- Partnerships: Strengthening cooperation with universities, businesses, public institutions, and international networks.

By anticipating future demands, from digital transformation to sustainability, AECs can reinforce their role as catalysts of equitable, accessible, and relevant adult learning.

5. Conclusion

For much of its history, adult education was overlooked—seen as supplementary or remedial. Today, it has emerged as a cornerstone of personal, professional, and societal development. Its role is particularly vital in empowering individuals to overcome literacy gaps, acquire new skills, adapt to economic and social changes, and improve quality of life. Ultimately, adult education contributes not only to individual advancement but also to the resilience and cohesion of entire communities.

However, challenges persist. Many adult learners still face barriers to accessing education—ranging from digital exclusion and financial constraints to geographic isolation and lack of recognition for prior learning. Older adults often require tailored programs to support lifelong cognitive engagement and employment longevity. Meanwhile, linguistic and cultural diversity in increasingly mobile societies calls for inclusive and adaptable pedagogical approaches.

To achieve these goals, diverse funding models that prioritize equity and access must be developed. Governments, employers, and civil society need to collaborate in ensuring that marginalized groups, including women, migrants, and people with disabilities, are central in adult learning strategies. This means eliminating barriers related to cost, location, digital access, and language.

The future demands a shift from episodic education to truly continuous, lifelong learning—supported by robust systems of guidance, intergenerational programs, mental health support, and community-based learning models. Adult education must evolve proactively in response to global transformations and local needs.

Adult Education Centres, though small in scale, are strategic actors in this transformation. As connectors between individuals and institutions, past experiences and future opportunities, they exemplify a human-centered approach to education. Their grounded yet adaptive models offer a compelling blueprint for how small institutions can play a powerful role in shaping the future of education—not just in Slovenia, but across Europe and beyond.

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