Impact of Erasmus+ on "Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement" in adult education

Produced by: Victor Verlaan (Ockham IPS), on behalf of the RIA-AE network.

One of the four horizontal priorities of Erasmus+, the participation priority cuts across every sector of the programme, including adult education. But how do adult education projects engage with it in practice, and what difference do they make? The latest findings from the RIA-AE network shed light on both questions.

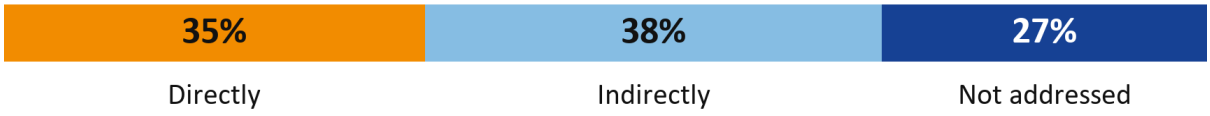
RIA-AE (Research-based Impact Analysis in Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes) is a transnational research network established in 2022 to study and strengthen the impact of Erasmus+ in adult education. At the time of its second monitoring round (2025–2026), the growing network brought together National Agencies from 21 countries taking part in Erasmus+ and collected 2,370 responses from beneficiary organisations. This article summarises the findings on the participation priority from Chapters 5 and 6 of the network's second EU Synthesis Report (2025–2026). To dive deeper into the subject, please read the full report on the RIA-AE website.

How projects address the priority



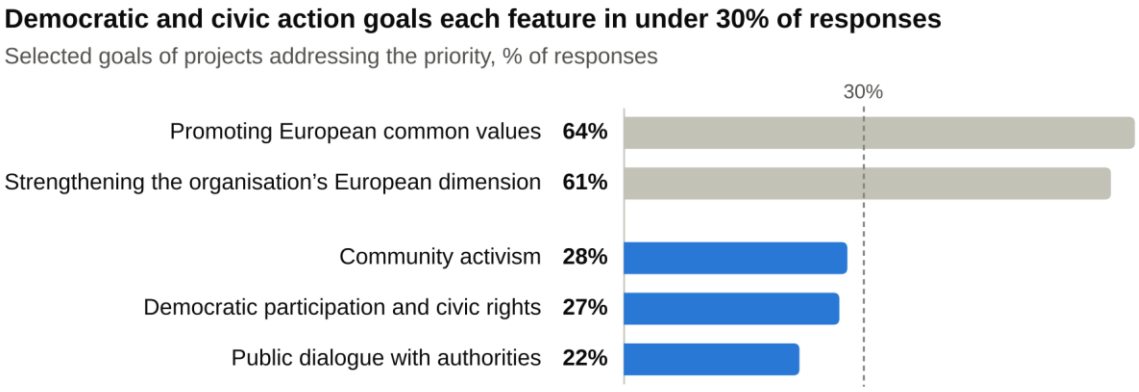
Source: RIA-AE network, online survey of beneficiary organisations (2025–2026)

The priority is widely present, although slightly more organisations address it indirectly than directly.



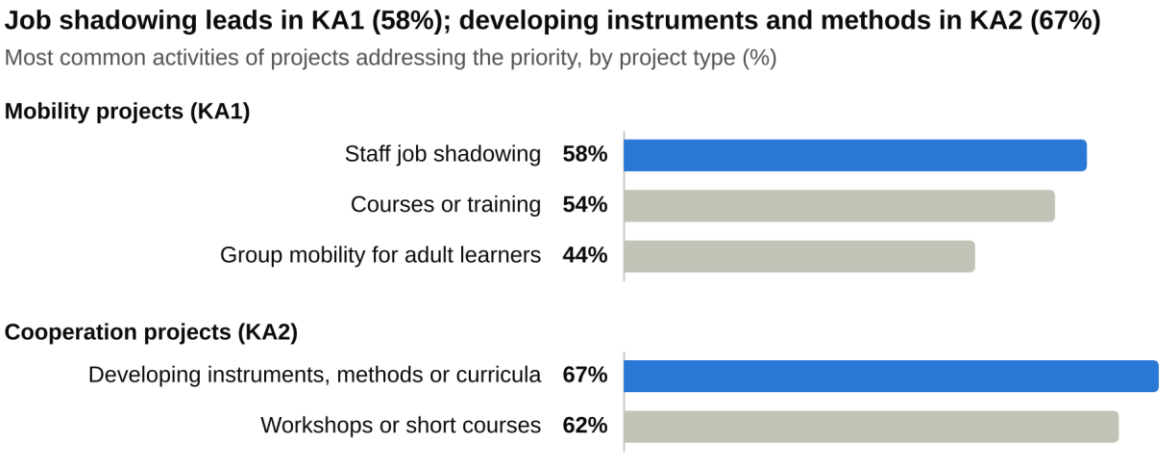
Source: RIA-AE network, online survey of beneficiary organisations (2025–2026)

When it comes to goals, projects addressing the priority most often promote European common values and strengthen the organisation's European dimension. Goals linked more explicitly to democratic and civic action (community activism, democratic participation and civic rights, and public dialogue with authorities) each feature in fewer than three in ten responses.



Source: RIA-AE network, online survey of beneficiary organisations (2025–2026)

Activities largely focus on educational practice and concrete results. In mobility projects (KA1), staff job shadowing and courses or training are particularly common, alongside group mobility for adult learners, while cooperation projects (KA2) most often develop instruments, methods or curricula and deliver workshops or short courses.



Source: RIA-AE network, online survey of beneficiary organisations (2025–2026).

Target groups

Staff of adult education organisations are the most frequently targeted group, which makes educators and volunteers important multipliers. Projects reach learners both directly and indirectly, through improved learning provision and trained educational staff. Target groups vary considerably between countries, but most often include the general adult population, young adults, women, adults living in peripheral areas, adults with health problems or physical or mental disabilities, migrants, and adults with low levels of education or basic skills.

By contrast, adults experiencing homelessness or addiction, people with a prison background and young adults not in employment, education or training (NEETs) are among the least frequently targeted groups.

Impact on organisations' learning offer and staff

Organisations that address the participation priority report that taking part in Erasmus+ has led to improvements in several areas. The strongest effects are an increased focus on European common

values, stronger cooperation with civil society organisations, enhanced critical thinking skills, a greater focus on civic competences, and an improved ability to address European citizenship. For each of these statements, more than 90% of respondents agree that there has been an improvement, and a substantial proportion strongly agree.

For staff, the strongest effects concern their ability to foster local community development, teach common European values and explore issues relating to these values. At least 93% of respondents agree that Erasmus+ has improved staff competences in these areas, with around a third strongly agreeing.

Greater confidence and civic engagement among learners

The report's case studies illustrate how the European dimension of Erasmus+ projects can strengthen learners' confidence, openness towards others, sense of belonging to a transnational or European community, and awareness of their role in local society and the wider European context.

It can also help them develop skills and attitudes relevant to democratic participation, civic engagement and common European values. These outcomes often emerge through practical experiences, dialogue, mobility and community-based learning. Although projects seldom explicitly aim to increase political mobilisation, they help learners articulate their interests and wishes, and strengthen their motivation and capacity to take an active role in their communities.

Four impact narratives in practice

The case-study analysis adds nuance by showing the different ways in which projects connect to the priority. *Encouraging civic engagement* is the most common primary impact narrative, followed by developing *competences and critical skills, and promoting common values*. Only a small proportion of the selected projects primarily create opportunities for participation in democratic processes or public decision-making.

Some projects produce valuable outcomes relating to inclusion, accessibility, well-being or general competence development, but the available evidence does not establish a sufficiently clear civic or democratic narrative. These case studies point to some of the difficulties in operationalising the broad and partly overlapping elements of the priority. Clearer guidance on what the participation priority entails could help beneficiaries connect their projects to it more directly.

Strengthening the contribution to the participation priority

Building on these findings, the report puts forward the following recommendations in relation to the participation priority.

1. *Make the priority more visible and clearly defined in programme implementation and assessment*. The priority should remain clearly visible in Erasmus+ programme objectives, calls and communication. Beneficiary organisations should receive practical guidance on how the priority can be translated into adult education projects, including examples of relevant approaches and good practices. Clearer conceptual guidance should support both applicants and assessors in understanding what meaningful engagement with the priority entails.
2. *Encourage deeper forms of democratic and civic learning.* Adult education activities can strengthen learners' political agency by creating opportunities to engage with public debate,

democratic institutions, collective decision-making and other forms of active citizenship. This does not mean promoting particular political positions; rather, it means strengthening learners' ability and confidence to participate meaningfully in democratic life.

3. *Strengthen educator capacity for democratic and civic education.* Professional development should focus on pedagogies and learning processes that enable adult learners to experience democratic practice, including participatory, dialogical and deliberative approaches, critical discussion and co-creation.

4. *Rebalance programme framing.* The framing and communication of Erasmus+ in adult education should continue to recognise adults not only as learners and workers, but also as citizens, community members and participants in democratic life. Skills for civic and democratic participation should be recognised as basic and transversal skills that also contribute to the objectives of the Union of Skills and to participation in working life.

Taken together, the findings show that Erasmus+ adult education already does much to nurture common values and civic engagement. The next step is to open more doors to democratic participation itself and ensure that it is meaningfully implemented.