

## Breaking the circle: improving participation in lifelong learning in a rural area

While cities provide many lifelong learning opportunities, access to formal and non-formal learning is often more difficult in rural areas. Flanders is a largely urbanized region and even one of the most densely populated parts of Europe. Nevertheless, there are large local differences. The region 'Westhoek' is one of the least densely populated areas in Flanders, and shows a (very) low rate of participation in adult learning compared to the rest of Flanders & the European norm (8,88% vs. 11,9% vs. 15%).

Causes for these low participations rates are, amongst others, problems with the accessibility of the training offer (mobility) and a lack of learning culture. The result is a vicious circle: low participation rates lead to a rationalisation of the regional training offer and a relocation of training programmes outside the region. The consequent sharp decline in training and educational offer in its turn is a recipe for ever-decreasing participation in adult learning.

As a regional development agency, POM West-Flanders aims to break out of this vicious circle and improve participation in lifelong learning for residents of the rural region 'Westhoek' in Belgium. To do so, we are currently experimenting with an innovative model for cooperation called the 'satellite model', which shows a lot of similarities with the concept of learning ecosystems (<https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/learning-ecosystems>). But we are also interested in learning from other regions in EU.

More specifically, we are interested in learning more about/focussing on:

- outlining strategies for engaging with citizens and stimulating a learning culture
- methodologies to develop innovative partnerships with local organizations, as collaborating with people who are closer to the regional environment is crucial so that policies reflect their real needs and stay relevant as much as possible
- innovation of the existing educational/training offer in rural areas (e.g. how digitalisation can help to address specific obstacles or barriers to learning)
- development of new programs and services that address identified gaps in the training offer and the barriers to access it
- labour market-oriented pathways as well as learning opportunities outside the system of existing adult education, compulsory education or the workplace (e.g. learning through volunteering)
- formal as well as non-formal learning opportunities

We would like to do this through:

- **knowledge sharing:** exchange best practices with other regions in Europe that have experimented with new ways to improve lifelong learning in rural areas
- **policy development:** design/refinement of flanking policy strategies and measures, including methodologies for impact measurement
- **dissemination:** creating awareness and transferring knowledge about the results

We would like to cooperate with:

- local and regional government organisations in other EU regions who face the same challenges.
- knowledge institutions with experience in policy development and impact measurement, specifically in the field of lifelong learning.