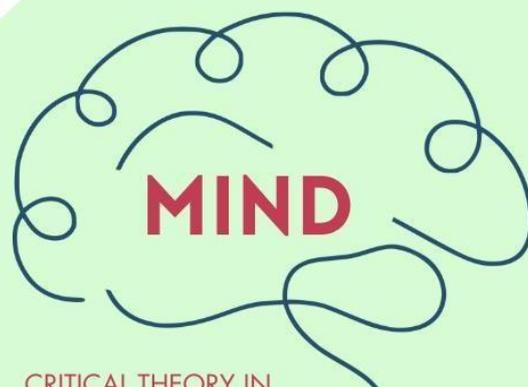# The MIND RECOMMENDATIONS
An advocacy paper for policymakers to promote critical thinking in non-formal adult education

MIND

CRITICAL THEORY IN
ADULT EDUCATION PRACTICE:
EMPOWERMENT FOR CRITICAL ACTIONS

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Executive summary

The MIND project set out to address a growing gap in adult education across Europe: the lack of systematic, evidence-based approaches to fostering critical thinking (CT) among adult learners. Through research, model development, and piloting, MIND demonstrated that CT is not an abstract academic goal, but a practical competence that empowers adults to make informed decisions, engage in democratic life, and respond constructively to social and digital challenges.

These Policy Recommendations aim to translate MIND's findings into action for adult education (AE) policymakers, municipalities, and AE providers. They advocate for embedding CT in adult learning strategies, funding schemes, educator training, and community-based programmes.

Introduction to the MIND project

The Erasmus+ project **MIND – Critical theory in adult education practice: empowerment for critical actions** (2023–2025) brings together eight partners from Lithuania, Latvia, Croatia, and Romania. Coordinated by the Lithuanian Association for Adult Education (LAAE), it unites NGOs, universities, and AE institutions experienced in promoting reflective, inclusive, and community-based learning.

The aim of the project is to foster a culture of critical thinking in non-formal adult education by strengthening educators' competences and empowering adult learners to apply CT in their personal, professional, and civic lives.

Through research, model development, piloting, and advocacy, MIND has demonstrated that CT is not an abstract academic goal but a practical competence that empowers adults to navigate information, make informed decisions, and engage actively in democratic life.

MIND's main results include:

- Compendium of Scientific Ideas: Critical Thinking in Non-Formal Adult Education

- Executive Report: Critical Thinking in Non-Formal Adult Education Programs and Documents

- The MIND Model: Model Framework for the Development of Critical Thinking in Non-Formal Adult Education

- The MIND Programme: Critical Thinking Development Programme and Materials for Non-Formal Adult Education

- The MIND Toolkit: Tools for Development of Critical Thinking in Non-Formal Adult Education

- The MIND recommendations. An Advocacy Paper for Policymakers to Promote Critical Thinking in Non-formal Adult Education (this document).

Developed from academic research and adult education practice, the MIND Model provides a structured yet adaptable pathway for developing critical thinking:

1. Evocation – activating learners' prior knowledge, experiences, and assumptions.

2. Key Questioning of prior knowledge, experience & intuition – encouraging curiosity, inquiry, and open-ended dialogue.

3. Comprehension – analysing information, multiple perspectives, and reasoning.

4. Reflection and metacognition – evaluating values, biases, and implications.

5. Decision-Making – applying CT to real-world contexts, leading to change.

Together, these results offer a comprehensive approach to integrating CT into non-formal AE and contribute to stronger, more reflective European learning communities.

Why critical thinking matters – findings from the MIND project

In today's rapidly changing social and digital landscape, adults face complex challenges – from navigating overwhelming information and misinformation to making responsible decisions that affect their families, communities, and societies. CT enables adults to question, analyse, and act, rather than passively consume information. It supports:

- personal development, through self-awareness and informed decision-making;

- employability, by fostering problem-solving and adaptability; and

- democratic participation, by strengthening citizens' capacity for reflection and dialogue.

The policy gap

Despite its importance, CT remains underrepresented in AE policies and strategies across Europe.

The MIND [Executive Report: Critical Thinking in Non-Formal Adult Education Programs and Documents](#) revealed that:

- CT is rarely mentioned explicitly in AE policy frameworks;

- when it is included, it is often linked narrowly to digital or media literacy;

- few national strategies describe specific methodologies or support mechanisms for developing CT among adults; and

- educators frequently lack both conceptual clarity and practical tools to teach CT effectively.

This gap highlights the need for stronger policy direction and pedagogical support to ensure CT becomes a recognised and measurable competence in AE.

The MIND contribution

The MIND project directly addressed this gap by developing a science- and practice-based model for nurturing CT in non-formal AE. It demonstrated that adult learning settings are particularly well suited to CT development because they are:

- participatory and experiential, encouraging active engagement;

- rooted in learners' real-life contexts, thus making reflection meaningful; and

- flexible and adaptive, allowing space for dialogue, experimentation, and personal growth.

The project's MIND Model structures the learning process through five interconnected stages: Evocation → Questioning → Comprehension → Reflection → Action. This model supports both educators and learners in developing CT as a competence that combines cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.

Evidence and key findings

Research conducted through the Compendium of Scientific Ideas: Critical Thinking in Non-Formal Adult Education and Executive Report: Critical Thinking in Non-Formal Adult Education Programs and Documents provided strong empirical grounding for these Recommendations:

- Adult learners respond best to real-life, problem-based activities rather than abstract theory.

- CT develops most effectively when educators act as facilitators, not traditional instructors.

- Trust, dialogue, and mutual respect are essential conditions for CT to flourish.

- AE institutions are willing and motivated to integrate CT but require policy-level recognition, resources, and professional support.

Together, these insights form the foundation of the MIND Policy Recommendations, demonstrating that promoting CT is both feasible and necessary for building resilient, democratic, and inclusive learning societies.

Introduction to the Policy Recommendations

The MIND project recognises that developing CT among adults is not only an educational goal but also a democratic necessity. The following Recommendations build on research, piloting, and reflection activities within the project and are structured according to three complementary levels of policy action:

- European level – strategic vision and policy alignment;

- national level – system integration, funding, and capacity building;

- local and regional level – community engagement and inclusion.

This layered approach reflects the belief that effective AE policy must operate across governance levels and involve the shared responsibility of policymakers, educators, and civil society.

The following Recommendations build on scientific evidence, piloting results, and collective reflection among project partners.

The Policy Recommendations pursue the following objectives:

- Formulate actionable policy guidance on how to integrate and promote the development of CT among adults in non-formal education.

- Strengthen the advocacy capacity of AE institutions, enabling them to engage more effectively with policymakers, municipalities, and other stakeholders.

- Support the use of these Recommendations as advocacy tools for politicians and decision-makers at municipal and regional levels, encouraging recognition of AE's civic and social impact.

- Demonstrate civic responsibility and engagement by developing recommendations that represent the collective expertise and social commitment of partner organisations and target groups.

- Promote science- and practice-based policymaking through evidence-based recommendations grounded in MIND's research, piloting, and alignment with key EU and national strategic documents.

- Contribute to AE policy development by highlighting CT as a core transversal competence essential for personal development, employability, and democratic participation.

Strategic and policy context

These Recommendations are grounded in key European and international frameworks that recognise CT as a transversal competence essential for lifelong learning, inclusion, and democracy:

- Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018)[1] – identifies CT as central across all competences.

- European Agenda for Adult Learning (2021–2030)[2] – highlights reflection and civic participation as priorities for active citizenship.

- LifeComp[3] and DigComp[4] frameworks – define CT as an essential dimension of personal, social, and digital competences.

- European Democracy Action Plan (2020)[5] – calls for strengthening media literacy and resilience to disinformation.

- UNESCO Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (RALE, 2015)[6] – promotes adults' capacity for autonomy, responsibility, and critical understanding.

By aligning MIND with these frameworks, the project supports policy coherence and contributes to the European vision of empowered, reflective, and informed citizens.

Shared responsibility for promoting critical thinking

Promoting CT among adults requires collaboration across multiple actors and governance levels.

- Policy frameworks, funding bodies, and educators must work together to ensure that learning environments nurture reflection, dialogue, and social responsibility.

- EU institutions provide the strategic direction and frameworks.

- National authorities embed CT into AE systems and quality standards.

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[1] European Commission (2019). *Key competences for lifelong learning.* Publications Office. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/569540

[2] European Council. (2021). *Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021–2030*. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021G1214(01)

[3] Sala, A., Punie, Y., Garkov, V., & Cabrera Giraldez, M. (2020). *LifeComp: The European framework for personal, social and learning to learn key competence.* Publications Office of the European Union. https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC120911

[4] Vuorikari, R., Kluzer, S., & Punie, Y. (2022). *DigComp 2.2: The digital competence framework for citizens - With new examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128415

[5] European Commission. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European economic and social committee and the Committee of the regions on the European democracy action plan.* (2020). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0790

[6] UNESCO (2015). *Recommendation on adult learning and education (RALE).* https://icae.global/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/RALE-guide_eng_JAN2017.pdf

- Local governments and AE institutions translate these policies into inclusive and accessible learning experiences.

This cooperative approach ensures that CT becomes a living practice, not merely a policy concept.

Recommendations for EU, national, and local and regional policymakers

The Recommendations are grouped by level of action and responsibility. Each is grounded in MIND's findings and aims to help policymakers, municipalities, and AE institutions strengthen CT in non-formal AE.

Recommendations for EU policymakers

Who can be contacted or involved:

European Commission (DG EAC, DG EMPL), Cedefop, ETF, EAEA, EPALE, European Parliament committees on education and employment, and European civil society networks focused on adult learning and democratic participation.

1. Integrate critical thinking into EU AE strategies

Recommendations:

- Embed CT as a transversal competence in European lifelong learning and AE strategies.

- Link CT to ongoing EU frameworks such as LifeComp, DigComp, and the European Skills Agenda.

- Align with the call for stronger connections between digital, social, and civic competences.

Implementation:

- Include CT in future EU policy updates and Council Recommendations on adult learning.

- Highlight CT as an eligibility or quality criterion in Erasmus+ and CERV calls.

- Promote exchange between EU-funded projects focusing on CT, digital literacy, and democratic participation.

2. Support research-practice-policy collaboration at EU level

Recommendations:

- Encourage multi-country collaboration between researchers, AE providers, and policymakers to explore CT development models and their societal impact.

Implementation:

Fund joint research and pilot initiatives on CT and active citizenship.

- Establish a European working group on CT in AE, ensuring alignment with the European Agenda for Adult Learning (2021–2030).

- Disseminate results through EPALE, FutureLabAE, and European Learning Cities networks.

3. Recognise and validate CT competences across Europe

Recommendations:

- Promote recognition of CT competence developed through non-formal and informal AE across Member States.

Implementation:

- Develop cross-country guidance for validation of CT within the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

- Include CT descriptors in European frameworks for micro-credentials.

- Encourage use of digital badges for CT competence linked to LifeComp domains ("Critical thinking," "Reflection," "Collaboration").

Recommendations for national policymakers

Who can be contacted or involved:

Ministries of Education, Labour, Culture, and Social Policy; national agencies for adult education and qualifications; teacher training institutions; AE associations and research councils; national EPALE teams.

1. Integrate CT into national AE and lifelong learning strategies

Recommendations:

- Recognise CT as a core transversal competence in AE policy and funding frameworks.

- Ensure CT appears explicitly alongside literacy, numeracy, and digital competences.

Implementation:

- Issue national policy guidelines defining CT competence for educators and learners.

- Reference the MIND Model as a practical pedagogical framework.

- Connect national education, media literacy, and citizenship programmes with CT competence.

2. Fund capacity building and continuous professional development (CPD)

Recommendations:

- Support systematic CPD opportunities for AE educators to teach and assess CT.

Implementation

- Adapt the MIND Programme modules into national CPD courses or micro-credentials.

- Encourage reflection-based training and mentoring approaches within AE networks.

- Support peer learning and exchange of practice at national and regional levels.

3. Support recognition and validation of CT learning

Recommendations:

- Develop mechanisms to recognise adults' CT competence gained through non-formal and informal learning – via micro-credentials, learning portfolios, or civic engagement certificates.

Implementation

- Integrate CT into national validation of prior learning (VPL) systems.

- Allow AE centres to issue digital badges or certificates for CT-related achievements.

- Align national recognition tools with LifeComp and DigComp frameworks.

4. Support community partnerships for CT learning

Recommendations:

- Support cooperation between AE providers, NGOs, cultural institutions, local media, and universities to offer joint CT programmes and scale the levels of CT learning outcomes.

Implementation:

- Fund national pilot projects testing the MIND Model in new contexts (workplace, community, digital AE).

- Commission studies on CT impact for democratic resilience and employability.

- Share results through EPALE or national AE networks.

5. Include CT indicators in quality assurance systems

Recommendations:

- Develop measurable indicators for CT learning outcomes and include them in national AE evaluation frameworks.

Implementation:

- Define CT-related outcomes (e.g., reflection, reasoning, civic participation).
- Use reflective journals, learner portfolios, and surveys as evidence sources.
- Include CT dimensions in national AE monitoring and evaluation reports.

Recommendations for local and regional policymakers

Who can be contacted or involved:

Municipal councils, regional education departments, local adult learning centres, libraries, NGOs, universities, and cultural institutions engaged in lifelong learning and civic initiatives.

1. Embed CT in local learning and civic strategies

Recommendations:

- Embed the development of CT competence in municipal education, culture, and civic development plans.

Implementation:

- Establish Community Critical Thinking Labs in AE centres, libraries, or cultural institutions.
- Integrate CT as one of the goals into local democracy, inclusion, or sustainability initiatives.

2. Ensure access and inclusion

Recommendations:

- Provide logistical and financial support (venues, transport, digital access) so that adults with less possibilities (for example, seniors, migrants, low-qualified) can participate in CT programmes.

Implementation:

- Offer free or low-cost participation in CT workshops for adults with less possibilities..
- Provide venues, transport subsidies, childcare, or digital equipment access.

- Partner with social services, NGOs, and migrant organisations for outreach.

- Schedule programmes flexibly (evenings, weekends) to increase accessibility.

3. Apply the MIND Model in educational practice

Recommendations:

- Use the five-stage MIND Model as a pedagogical foundation for courses and workshops.

- Encourage educators to facilitate the MIND Model stages in any subject area.

Implementation:

- Integrate the five stages of the MIND Model into existing AE courses (digital skills, employability, social inclusion) to ensure a reflective learning cycle.

4. Engage local decision-makers as learners

Recommendations:

- Encourage municipal leaders and public servants to take part in CT workshops themselves, strengthening evidence-based decision-making and public trust.

Implementation:

- Invite mayors, councillors, and public servants to participate in short CT workshops or dialogue sessions.

- Use real local policy challenges as learning cases to apply CT tools.

- Encourage joint reflection sessions between decision-makers and citizens to strengthen mutual understanding and evidence-based decision-making.

5. Build continuous CT development in organisations

Recommendations:

- Establish regular internal peer-learning and mentoring processes for educators to exchange CT teaching experiences.

Implementation:

- Regular reflection meetings, peer observations, and co-facilitated sessions using the MIND Programme and Toolkit.

6. Foster local partnerships and learner involvement

Recommendations:

- Support collaboration among AE centres, NGOs, universities, and cultural organisations to co-create CT programmes.

- Design programmes where learners identify issues, explore perspectives, and propose actions. CT is strengthened when learners experience ownership of their learning.

Implementation:

- Involve learners in co-designing workshops and community projects.

- Promote peer facilitation and co-learning across generations.

- Use project-based or problem-solving approaches where learners define real issues and test solutions.

- Include reflection and feedback loops so learners evaluate outcomes and suggest improvements.

7. Measure and communicate impact

Recommendations:

- Use simple self-assessment tools to document changes in learners' attitudes, decisions, and engagement, demonstrating value to funders and policymakers.

Implementation:

- Collect feedback through self-assessment tools (e.g. reflective journals) and short surveys.

- Document impact stories showing how learners apply CT in daily life or community action.

- Share results in annual reports, policy briefs, and local media to raise visibility.

- Use findings to inform funding proposals and strengthen advocacy efforts.

8. Engage in local advocacy

Recommendations:

- Actively present the role of AE in developing CT to local policymakers, employers, and community groups.
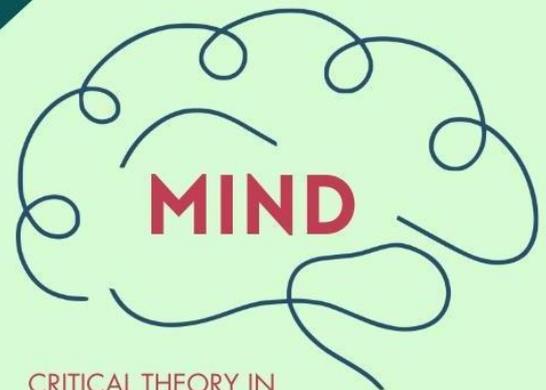
Implementation:

- Develop annual "Impact Reports" showcasing community changes resulting from CT programmes (e.g., civic participation, social inclusion stories).
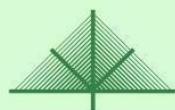
A call for action

The MIND partnership affirms that CT is a necessity for resilient, democratic, and cohesive societies. By supporting adults to think, question, and act, AE systems can help citizens navigate complexity with confidence and empathy.

These Recommendations invite policymakers, municipalities, and AE providers to work together in sustaining MIND's legacy: to make CT a defining feature of lifelong learning, and through it, to strengthen communities and democracy itself.

We invite stakeholders across Europe to join us in translating these Recommendations into practice through collaboration, dialogue, and shared learning.

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