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NETWORKING AND RECOGNITION IN THE SERVICE OF LIFELONG LEARNING



We are used to being graded at schools and other educational institutions for our learning; the higher grades may also serve the purpose of recognition. In childhood our achievements are praised by grown-ups as they please. Afterwards, when adults, things change, especially in our Nordic circumstances – appraisal and recognition may acquire a slightly awkward touch, the person that decides to show appreciation may gain a reputation of being overly sentimental, too emotional or simply lacking credibility. It may be equally embarrassing for the recipient – recognition may seem either redundant or given for something that appears inherent. Learning is the activity that may fall into the latter category. Nevertheless, self-improvement, becoming a smarter and better person, is the only real way to contribute – make an effort to change the society and the world around us. Is this not worth recognising? What kind of impact does recognising learning achievements have on adults and thereby on the society? How is it practiced in a small European Union member state? Is it necessary at all?

How it all began – the birth of Adult Learners' Week

In 1998, Estonia was a young country blowing in the winds of change. Adult learning was everything but the priority in a situation where people were struggling to satisfy their basic needs. Nevertheless, the first Adult Learners' Week (ALW) took place on 7–11 September as a joint effort of the Association of Estonian Adult Educators Andras (AEAE Andras) and the Ministry of Education (now Ministry of Education and Research). It served the purpose of encouraging people to think about self-improvement as a way of pursuing higher aims and initiating the broad-based discussion regarding adult learning in the society.

The 2nd ALW of 11–18 October 1999 brought the first categories of recognition: titles of the learner and educator of the year as well as education-friendly organisation of the year that were announced at the Opening Ceremony in Viljandi Culture College (now Viljandi Culture Academy). It became a tradition to announce the title-holders at the national opening ceremony and for decades October remained the month of ALW.

2019 was the year to bring change in that respect, when the recognition ceremony took place in early November, after the actual ALW. The Ministry of Education and Research awards their letters of appreciation to all title-holders at national level. Opening ceremonies have taken place in various places over Estonia and have allowed a large number of participants to celebrate and recognise learning. In 2006, 326 people had gathered in Jõhvi Concert Hall and a record number of 391 people enjoyed the event at Mooste Folk House in 2010. The ALW has truly become one of the main means of promoting lifelong learning in Estonia.

New developments in recognising adult learning

Recognition categories have also changed in time. Besides the aforementioned three categories, an education-friendly local government was added in 2003. It was assumed that the role of local government as the authority closest to people cannot be underestimated from the perspective of adult learning. Despite the fact that local governments did not have the obligation to deal with the educational issues of adult population, due to the emerging adult education network the more aware regions acknowledged that these questions needed to be addressed – the strength of every local government lies in its active and smart people.

As the word about recognition in adult education spread, the number of nominees increased as well, generating the need to bring forward more than one person or organisation per category. Therefore, 2007 brought special awards – the practice that has been followed in all the categories ever since. The first special awards were given in the learner's category. In 2011 the category of public favourite was introduced. The nominated learners' profiles were published on the AEAE Andras' website and people had a chance to vote for their favourite.

In 2015, another innovation was launched – the category of learning promotion deed, highlighting remarkable initiatives/projects in adult education. In 2016 and 2017, the library of the year was announced in order to recognise the libraries' role in learning and as community centres. Since 2017, the category of education friendly local government ceased to exist and in 2018 the category of education friendly organisation was replaced by learner friendly employer.

ALW brings local communities together

The events and recognition of ALW belong together and have come close to people. The windows of village halls and community centres are lit in these October weeks and people are involved in the most diverse range of activities, be it computer classes, handicraft, cookery, language courses or what not. In 2019, a learning lesson's campaign was launched, enabling people to come together for one hour, acquire something exciting and useful and put it on the interactive map. On 11 October,

177 teams nationwide participated in the learning lesson campaign. ALW has managed to bring together people of different age groups and social background.

Everything described above is made to happen due to the adult education network that covers the whole of Estonia and has formerly been known as the network of Adult Learners' Week. Networking is coordinated and run by the regional coordinators of adult education in the counties – voluntary activists who are familiar with local circumstances and know the people, have the capacity to find solutions and put initiatives into practice. They, together with their network members, are also responsible for organising regional recognition events that started in 2005 and where the regional best are awarded in categories similar to the national recognition. The growing number of nominees proves that recognition has become increasingly broad-based and that learning achievements are becoming widely noticed in the society. Over the years 2000–2019 almost 3500 nominees have been submitted in total, including the 1680 nominees in the learner's category.

Local recognition events reflect the uniqueness of the region. Representatives of local governments and educational institutions, entrepreneurs, etc. are invited to participate, but the main characters are the people who can be recognised by the sparkle in their eyes and the festive look – recipients of the recognition. The importance of regional recognition ceremonies lies in the fact that it really focuses on every single person and organisation that has been nominated; often all the nominees and their submitters are given the attention they deserve. This motivates them and helps to realise that their dedication is noticed. Community centres, village halls, local attractions, etc. are chosen as venues. Even the snacks are usually made and served by local people's hands.

The role of local newspapers in disseminating information regarding the events of the ALW as well as recognition ceremonies is of great importance. In Rapla County, for example, an annual ALW supplement is published with the county newspaper, covering everything that takes place in the region at that time. Years of cooperation with local newspapers has facilitated spreading the idea of learning at any age.

Recognising learning: meaning and social impact

Amongst all the regional title-holders, the broad-based committee set up by AEAE Andras selects the very best – the learners who have, often despite difficulties, managed to change their lives considerably, at the same time being the role models to others; educators whose word matters and who put their heart into what they do; organisations where people do not exist as mere figures in an Excel table, but where the importance of learning is fully understood; initiatives which create a better, more caring and richer society not just in the material sense.

In order to understand the meaning and impact of recognition, in the framework of the current paper some questions were asked of the title-holders of the learner of the year. Our intention was to find out about the impact recognition has had on their lives and how they assess their coping on the present day.

The 13 respondents considered the impact of recognition positive and motivating. The understanding may come with hindsight – it is stated only later that it gave them the confidence to proceed. Some of the respondents found the recognition quite unexpected but pleasant surprise, though. Several people have also assumed their role as promoters and role models who have been able to inspire their family members, colleagues, friends, etc. to take up learning.

Another positive aspect of recognition lies in the newly opened possibilities, including meeting relevant people. The more mature respondents have emphasised the aspect of age – recognition has proved to be particularly valuable in the second half of life when the threat of becoming a passive viewer in social life is greater. Learning and the accompanied recognition have encouraged people to remain active also in the later years of their lives. Almost all the title-holders have continued their studies in various ways, either at universities, learning languages, acquiring new professions, etc. As the title is accompanied by certain media coverage, greater public attention has also been mentioned. The fact that learning achievements can be something to gain a reputation for is also worth mentioning.

Almost all the respondents were satisfied with what they do and have considered their coping with life good. Hardships have also been mentioned – there is no escaping them – but learning and education were seen as advantages helping to overcome them. Recognised learners also take into account their communities and surrounding environment which they have the responsibility to shape. This shows the broader mindset – their perspective is not just personal.

It can be concluded that the recognised learners are set on finding solutions; they understand their responsibility and do not wait for someone to make decisions for them. Years of communication with the title-holders has proved these people to be trustworthy and determined as well as caring and helpful, always keeping their promises and noticing others' needs – thereby creating the more empathic environment we are very much in need of today. Their stories touch and speak volumes inspiring us to move towards such a society.

Watch a video where three recognised learners talk about their learning and recognition here: