

Brussels-based organisations doing policy advocacy through EU-funded projects: The case of the European Association for the Education of Adults

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Abstract

This paper examines how a Brussels-based NGO, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), engages in policy advocacy through less conventional and underexplored channels, such as participation in EU-funded projects and the cultivation of transnational networks. Empirical data were collected using network ethnography to map EAEA's relationships through collaborative projects and to trace its funding sources between 2014 and 2024. Our findings indicate that EAEA has substantially increased its participation in EU-funded projects over the past decade, both as a coordinator and as a partner, often in collaboration with its ordinary and associate members. This shift reflects both a strategic emphasis on project acquisition and an increasing dependence on EU programmes. It further raises questions about autonomy and strategic direction. The study contributes to existing literature by exploring the role of project engagement as a vehicle for collaboration and policy advocacy among Brussels-based NGOs.

Keywords: EU, EAEA, advocacy, NGO, networks

Introduction

Most non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that operate internationally were born to engage in policy advocacy in response to global trends, and their number has risen exponentially over several decades (Fogarty, 2011). Similarly, in the European Union (EU), the number of NGOs established to represent larger interests than those of single

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member states has increased over time. Often, these NGOs establish or transfer their head office in Brussels to be closer to the EU institutions on which they want to exert influence. Against this backdrop, several studies have considered the policy advocacy of transnational NGOs in global policy campaigns such as ‘Education for All’ (Mundy, 2012; Mundy & Murphy, 2001; Tota, 2014), or the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (Tarozzi, 2020, 2022), to mention a few. By contrast, the policy advocacy of Brussels-based NGOs to influence European education has received less attention.

It is to fill this gap that in 2022 the University of Verona (Italy) initiated POL-MOB, a self-financed project dedicated to exploring NGOs’ political mobilisation and European governance, which occasionally benefits from collaboration with colleagues from across Europe. This article builds on previous insights gained through this project (Milana, 2024; Milana & Tronca, 2026; Milana & Tronca, in press) to investigate how collaborative projects, and the EU funding that comes with them, support the policy advocacy (see Tilley et al., 2018) of one Brussels-based NGOs, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), beyond traditional policy advocacy tools such as campaigning or directly addressing decision-makers. Indeed, project funding has become a central instrument of EU policy-making across policy areas, while project management has emerged as a dominant logic of governance within European public affairs (Büttner & Leopold, 2016).

EAEA is the oldest NGO in Europe with a vested interest in adult learning, with a particular emphasis on access to and participation in non-formal adult education, still in operation. Established in 1953 under the name *European Bureau of Adult Education* by representatives from several European countries, and originally based on voluntary work, EAEA changed its name and legal status in the late 1990s, when it transferred its Secretariat to Brussels, thus gaining legal personality as an international non-profit organisation according to Belgian law (EAEA, 2014, art. 3). Its aim was – and remains – to connect and represent organisations directly involved in adult learning across the member states of the Council of Europe in order to pursue its mission, which by Constitution, is:

to work for the creation of a learning society through encouraging the demand for learning amongst individual, organisations and communities, and especially amongst women and excluded or underparticipating groups, and through improving the response of providers of learning opportunities and governments at all levels. (EAEA, 2014, art. 6)

Today, EAEA engages in policy advocacy, offers resources and information to its members, facilitates networking and partnerships among stakeholders, and fosters a community of adult education organisations across Europe. As of 2025, it comprised 120 member organisations, including 55 ordinary members, from 43 countries, and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide (EAEA, n.d.).

Meanwhile, according to the EU Transparency Register, EAEA is also a member of several Brussels-based NGOs (i.e., CONCORD, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, Lifelong Learning Platform, Social Platform, SDG Watch), international NGOs (i.e., International Council for Adult Education, ICAE), and other international organisations (i.e., Council of Europe, UNESCO Liaison Committee). Moreover, it participates in an intergroup of the European Parliament on the Future of Education and Skills for a Competitive Europe and participates in other EU-supported forums and platforms like the European Alliance for a Just Transition and the Pact for Skills.

The remainder of this article is structured into four sections. First, we combine an organisational and a network perspective to frame EAEA, like other Brussels-based NGOs, as a meta-organisation, whose capacity for policy advocacy depends on its formal

governance as much as on its networks of collaborative relationships. On this ground, we present the research questions that guided this study. Next, we illustrate the data sources on which we built, and how they were gathered and analysed through a network ethnographic approach. Finally, we present and discuss our findings.

Theoretical underpinnings: Framing EAEA through organisational and network perspectives

We conceptualise Brussels-based NGOs like EAEA as meta-organisations, meaning they are composed of other organisations rather than individuals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). Meta-organisations are thus formal organisations in which social interactions result from decisions, i.e., about membership, hierarchy, rules, etc. (Ahrne et al., 2016), which brings about a ‘decided’ rather than an emerging order (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). Accordingly, meta-organisations exercise discretion over the admission of new members, typically favouring organisations with aligned values and capabilities (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). Prospective members, in turn, seek out meta-organisations that offer access to valuable resources and expertise relevant to their goals.

By constitution, EAEA ordinary membership is granted to NGOs that promote or provide adult education or learning at the highest national or equivalent level recognised within their country’s constitutional framework (EAEA, 2014, art. 6), which are typically national-level organisations that either serve as coordinating bodies for adult education in their country or represent national interests where no single coordinating organisation exists (EAEA, n.d.). In addition, EAEA associate membership is open to all other organisations that promote or provide adult education or learning (EAEA, 2014, art. 6) at local, regional, and international levels. Although all members compose the General Assembly – see below – only ordinary members hold voting rights and are eligible for Presidency and the Executive Board – see below (EAEA, 2014). Accordingly, ordinary membership fosters structured collaboration that enables the representation of a broad spectrum of countries and educational sectors.

The primary purpose of meta-organisations is to organise and facilitate cooperation among a diverse set of organisations; thus, they function as platforms where member organisations interact, collaborate, and pursue shared policy advocacy objectives. As ‘umbrella collectives’, however, they possess some degree of actor-hood, which depends on some interconnected decision-making with and among their members (Berkowitz et al., 2022). It is worth noting here that since EAEA incorporates both national and international umbrella organisations among its members, it can also be characterised as a ‘meta-meta-organisation’, further extending the conceptualisation of meta-organisations introduced above.

EAEA’s formal interconnected decision-making is provided by its governance structure, composed of a President and an Executive Board, both elected biannually by the General Assembly. The President legally represents EAEA and is the first responsible for policy contacts with European bodies and institutions (EAEA, 2014, art. 20). The Executive Board manages EAEA without limiting the powers reserved to the General Assembly, EAEA decision-making body (EAEA, 2014, art. 16, 21). The Board appoints a Secretary General to implement decisions and to manage all operational tasks with the help of staff employed at the Head Office in Brussels (EAEA, 2014, art. 25).

By constitution, ordinary members may serve on the Board or as President for a maximum of three consecutive terms. Importantly, Board meetings are open to all

members, ensuring transparency and participation in decision-making processes (EAEA, 2014, art. 23).

Brussels-based NGOs exert their actor-hood as intermediary organisations (Ainsworth & Sened, 1993) that are involved in a ‘double loop transmission’ (Milana, 2024): on the one hand, they channel national and collective interests and initiatives to the EU level, on the other hand, they also channel EU interests and initiatives to national, regional and local authorities, thanks also to the mediation of their constituency. This means that their effectiveness in policy advocacy, like for other types of meta-organisations, depends on the active participation and cooperation of their constituency (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). Such an active participation and cooperation, in our view, does not reside only in their ‘decided order’. Accordingly, under POL-MOB, Milana and Tronca (2026) adopted a structural interactionist perspective to examine the networks of relations of one Brussels-based NGO. This perspective assumes that the structure of a network of relationships conditions its actors’ actions at the same time as such actions modify the whole network of relationships (Degenne & Forsé, 2004). Thus, the authors paid attention to one Brussels-based NGO (NGO1) and examined the network of internal collaborative relations among its affiliates (all of them Brussels-based NGOs), but also the network of external collaborative relations NGO1 had with other organisations (at a given time). The results highlight that membership in NGO1 can help collaborative relations among its affiliates and potentially increase their chances to exert pressure on its agenda, but also to assist in its policy advocacy at the EU level. Following the same approach, the authors also examined the networks of internal and external collaborative relations of one of NGO1’s member organisations (here called MO) (at the same point in time) (Milana & Tronca, *in press*). This new study pointed to MO’s significant contribution to the network governance of NGO1, thus suggesting a potential gain for NGO1 to have MO among its affiliates. Yet, even with active participation and cooperation, cooperation among members can coexist with contradictory tensions: while membership in a Brussels-based NGO like EAEA offers its members benefits such as networking, greater collective influence, access to resources and social status, it also entails the risk of conflicts among members, leadership tensions, competition and possibly weak central authority. Despite these inherent tensions, both studies confirm that networks of collaborative relations are important assets for the policy advocacy of Brussels-based NGOs, like for other types of policy networks operating at national (e.g., Viseu & Carvalho, 2021) or European level (e.g., Olmedo et al., 2013).

Complementing this research, in a previous study, Milana (2024) examined the factors that, from an organisational perspective, can potentially support or hamper the capacity of two Brussels-based NGOs in influencing EU policymaking and implementation processes. The results highlighted, among others, the instrumental role of externally funded projects for policy advocacy; both organisations’ priority is to engage in projects generating evidence to support EU policy reforms or the implementation of EU policies in member states. The study also pointed to a stronger budgetary dependence from the EU that comes with higher involvement in EU-funded projects by these organisations. Furthermore, operating in Brussels and in close proximity to other EU institutions and NGOs, may expose organisations like EAEA to institutional isomorphic pressures, which may shape not only their policy advocacy strategies but also their participation in the EU project funding ecosystem, as well as their priorities and organisational identity over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

A distinct strand of the literature has extensively examined the relationships between NGOs and external donors (e.g., international agencies, governments, or foundations), highlighting concerns about the potential dependency of civil society organisations

arising from such funding; particular attention has also been paid to these dynamics when EU institutions act as donors. Research results are mixed, depending on the cases under investigation. For instance, Salgado (2010) argues that EU funding shapes NGOs' roles and practices by encouraging alignment with institutional priorities, potentially constraining their autonomy and weakening their participatory and democratic functions, and has recently questioned whether the EU should continue funding NGOs for advocacy (Salgado, 2025). Still, existing evidence also suggests a more pro-active engagement of NGOs to negotiate between accessing EU funds and maintaining independent agendas through diverse strategies that allow reconciling donor expectations with their own organisational objectives (Ketola, 2016). Therefore, the EU-NGOs relation via funded activities should be read with caution, as some evidence points to a more nuanced relation rather than a dependency relation as most commonly assumed (e.g., Koubek, 2020). Even Salgado (2025) acknowledges evidence that EU-funded NGOs often act independently and sometimes even oppose policies by the European Commission.

Building on these results, in this paper, we focus on EAEA to investigate how it engages in policy advocacy through EU-funded projects and the cultivation of transnational networks of collaboration that comes with it. Specifically, we asked: *What is the extent of EAEA's engagement in EU-funded projects, either as coordinator or partner, and how has this evolved over time? How does project engagement impact EAEA's budget? What is the relation between EAEA's project engagement and its network of relations?*

Methodology: A network ethnography of EAEA's project engagement

To answer the above questions, we performed a network ethnography (Ball, 2016; Ball & Junemann, 2012), which allowed us to map EAEA's relationships through collaborative projects and to trace EAEA's funding sources from 2014 to 2024. This covers the ongoing programming period in the EU (2021-2027) until 2024, and the previously concluded one (2014-2020). The empirical material encompasses official Erasmus+ project listings by the European Commission, EAEA's managerial and activity reports, and content published on EAEA's website, as well as those of its partner organisations.

The research process began with the systematic identification of EAEA's participation in EU-funded projects. This was achieved through extensive searches of the organisation's website and its archived project listings. We supplemented this with a review of EAEA's annual activity and management reports, in total close to 30 documents, which provided additional context on its activities and funding. Our focus was directed toward Erasmus+ projects under Key Action 2 (KA2) and Key Action 3 (KA3) for two reasons: first, as these were the only funding streams for which sufficient information was available via more than one source; second – and most importantly – because the role these funds play in supporting policy advocacy in adult education and learning is still underexplored, with few exceptions (cf. Mikulec & Kristl, 2025).

Projects were first identified through EAEA's own documentation and subsequently verified and cross-referenced using official Erasmus+ project listings (see Table 1). These covered the KA2 funding periods from 2014 to 2020 and from 2021 to 2027 (with updates available up until 2024), as well as KA3 projects from 2014 to 2020 and from 2021 to 2027 (with partial updates available up until 2024). Each project was examined in terms of its funding structure, EAEA's role as either coordinator or partner, and the nature and composition of its institutional partnerships. It is worth noting here that the Erasmus+

project overviews that we used as part of the empirical material were last updated on March 19, 2024.

Table 1. Official Erasmus+ project listings (source: authors' own table)

Listing	Programming period	
	2014-2020	2021-2027 (until 2024)
Erasmus+ KA2 Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices Projects Overview	x	
Erasmus+ KA2 Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices Projects Overview		x
Erasmus+ KA3 Support for Policy Reform Projects Overview	x	
Erasmus+ KA3 Support for Policy Reform Projects Overview		x

A key limitation in the dataset concerns the lack of publicly available complete project overview data for KA3 projects from 2021 to 2024. While no consolidated project overview exists for this period, we conducted targeted searches using the Erasmus+ project search tool online. By applying the filters ‘Call Years: 2021-2024’, ‘Coordinator: EAEA’, and ‘Key Action: KA3’, we were able to identify four relevant projects in which EAEA was the coordinator. However, these entries lacked details about partner organisations, listing only participating countries without specifying the organisations involved. Additional attempts to retrieve partnership data using the available filters proved unsuccessful. So, this information was excluded when mapping EAEA’s network of collaborations through projects (cf. Table 2), while it was included when examining EAEA’s overall engagement with and type of participation in projects (cf. Figure 1). Similarly, funding budgets for some projects are absent from the official overviews and not available through other publicly accessible sources. In addition, managerial reports are missing from the EAEA website for the years 2016, 2023, and 2024, resulting in further gaps in the dataset.

To analyse interaction patterns and the structure of project-based partnerships, we conducted a network analysis using Gephi software. Prior to importing the empirical material into Gephi, the data were cleaned and organised into two primary datasets compatible with the software’s input requirements. Specifically, we prepared a nodes file, listing all participating organisations along with attributes such as organisation type and country of origin, and an edges file, representing collaborative ties between organisations based on shared project involvement. Each edge denoted a connection from a project coordinator to a partner organisation, thereby constructing a directed network that reflected coordination dynamics within the 56 projects under examination. Additionally, project-level information (e.g., project codes, grant amounts) was compiled separately to support contextual interpretation. The network analysis conducted using Gephi informed the construction of Table 2.

As this study draws exclusively on publicly available data, there are no immediate ethical concerns regarding the use of confidential or personal information. Nevertheless, we approached the analysis with respect toward the organisation and maintained objectivity in the interpretation of empirical material. To improve the reliability of our

findings, empirical material extracted from EAEA's own documentation was systematically cross-referenced with online sources and official Erasmus+ project overviews and data wherever possible.

Main findings

In this section, we illustrate our main findings. First, we focus on the collaborative relations that EAEA established through EU-funded projects in the period under consideration in this study, and its likely partners. Then we consider how EAEA's project engagement changed over time and the programming periods of the EU. Finally, we pay attention to EAEA's funding structure and any financial dependencies that emerge from budgetary information.

Frequent collaborations and likely partners

Between 2014 and 2024, EAEA has established varying degrees of collaboration with a wide range of partner organisations across Europe, both as a coordinator of projects and as a project partner. According to our empirical material, EAEA has collaborated with a total of 214 organisations over the past ten years through project work, either directly by coordinating projects or indirectly by participating as a partner in projects led by other organisations. In this section, we analyse the collaborative relations that EAEA established through EU funded projects, yet it should be noted not all the 214 organisations will be represented, since we decided to exclude those that cooperated with EAEA only once. The organisations presented below are therefore those that have collaborated in projects coordinated by EAEA on at least two occasions, reflecting more sustained patterns of cooperative engagement (see Figure 1 and Table 2).

Figure 1. Network of organisations that partnered with EAEA twice or more, 2014-2024 (source: authors' own figure)

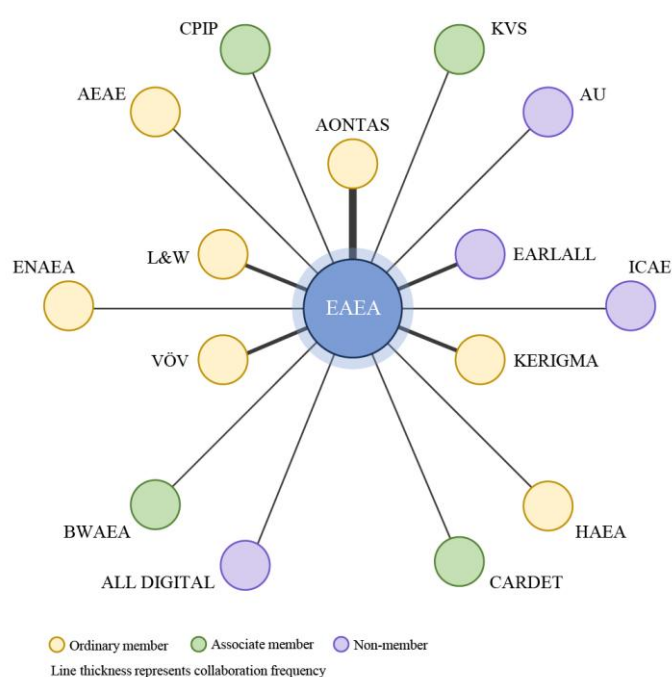


Table 2. Information on organisations that partnered with EAEA, 2014-2024 (source: authors' own table)

Acronyms	Full name (English translation)	Country	Board representation	Other relevant info
AONTAS	National Adult Learning Organisation	Ireland	Continuous representation since 2011	—
L&W	National Learning and Work Institute	UK	President (2008-2013), Board (2013-2019)	—
VÖV	Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen (Association of Austrian Adult Education Centres)	Austria	Board member (2013-2017)	—
KERIGMA	KERIGMA - Instituto de Inovação e Desenvolvimento Social de Barcelos	Portugal	—	Membership discontinued in 2020
EARLALL	European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning	Belgium	—	Member of LLLP
AEAE	Asociatia Euro Adult Education (formerly EUROED) (The Euro Adult Education Association)	Romania	Board member (2013-2019)	—
ENAEA	Estonian Non-formal Adult Education Association	Estonia	Board member (2011-2013)	—
HAEA	Hellenic Adult Education Association	Greece	Board member (2019-present)	—
CPIP	Centrul pentru Promovarea Învăţării Permanente (The Centre for Promoting Lifelong Learning)	Romania	—	—
KVS	Kansanvalistusseura (The Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation)	Finland	—	—
BWAEA	The Baden-Württemberg Adult Education Association	Germany	—	—
CARDET	Centre for the Advancement of Research and Development in Educational Technology	Cyprus	—	Not yet listed on official website
ALL DIGITAL	ALL DIGITAL AISBL	Belgium	—	Member of LLLP
ICAE	International Council for Adult Education	Serbia	—	EAEA is a regional member of ICAE
AU	Algebra University	Croatia	—	—

The organisation with which EAEA has collaborated the most over the past ten years is AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, with four joint initiatives. AONTAS is Ireland's national organisation for adult and community education providers and adult learners, and it is a longstanding ordinary member of EAEA. During the past ten years, several of its representatives have served almost continuously on the EAEA Executive Board.

Several other organisations have also collaborated closely with EAEA, each participating in three joint initiatives. Among these organisations, National Learning and Work Institute (L&W) and Verband Österreichischer Volkshochschulen (VÖV) are the only current ordinary members of EAEA. Notably, the EAEA President from 2008 to 2013 was a representative of L&W, and another representative from the organisation served on the EAEA Board from 2013 to 2019. As a result, L&W held continuous representation on the EAEA executive board for over a decade. VÖV is an ordinary member of EAEA and has served on the EAEA Executive Board between 2013-2017. KERIGMA was previously an ordinary member, but its membership was discontinued in 2020 after interrupting membership fees payment. Although EARLALL is not a member of EAEA, it is a Brussels-based network of regions and a standing member of the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP), itself a Brussels-based organisation active in education and training, of which EAEA is also a member.

Another group of partners has each engaged in two project collaborations with EAEA (see Table 2). Among the organisations listed in Table 2, several are formal members of EAEA or are affiliated through a shared network. Asociatia Euro Adult Education, Estonian Non-formal Adult Education Association (ENAEA), and Hellenic Adult Education Association (HAEA) are ordinary members of EAEA. Each has had representatives serving on the EAEA Executive Board over the past decade. Specifically, a representative from Asociatia Euro Adult Education was a board member from 2013 to 2019; a representative from ENAEA served from 2011 to 2013; and a HAEA representative has served on the board from 2019 to the present. Centrul pentru Promovarea Învăţării Permanente (CPIP), the Baden-Württemberg Adult Education Association and Kansanvalistusseura (KVS) are associate members of EAEA. Centre for Advancement of Research & Development in Educational Technology (CARDET) became an associate member in 2023, according to EAEA's activity reports, although it is not yet listed on the official website. Among the remaining organisations, ALL DIGITAL is not a member of EAEA but is a member of LLLP, in which EAEA also holds membership, as noted. ICAE is not a member of EAEA either; instead, EAEA is a regional member of ICAE, representing a different form of affiliation. Hence, of all the organisations that have collaborated twice with EAEA in the past decade, only Algebra University seems not to hold relations with EAEA through direct membership or membership in other formal networks to which EAEA is affiliated.

The frequency of collaborations suggests that, while EAEA engages with a broad network of organisations, certain partners are more likely to feature repeatedly. Over the past decade, EAEA has shown a clear tendency to collaborate more frequently with organisations that are its ordinary or associate members, particularly those with strong internal representation. AONTAS, for example, has collaborated with EAEA on four occasions and has maintained almost continuous representation on the EAEA Board since 2011. Similarly, the L&W, which has participated in three joint projects, is an ordinary member and has contributed both a President (2008-2013) and a Board member (2013-2019). The same applies to HAEA, ENAEA, and Euro Adult Education, all of which have collaborated on two projects with EAEA and have had representatives serving on the Executive Board during different periods. Among the organisations that have collaborated with EAEA twice, the majority are either ordinary or associate members or are affiliated through other networks (i.e., ICAE, LLLP), of which EAEA is also a member. Therefore, while membership is not a strict prerequisite for project collaboration, as shown by non-members such as Algebra University, it remains a strong factor, as it does affiliation through broader networks like LLLP and ICAE. These forms of connection suggest that EAEA remains open to strategically relevant partnerships

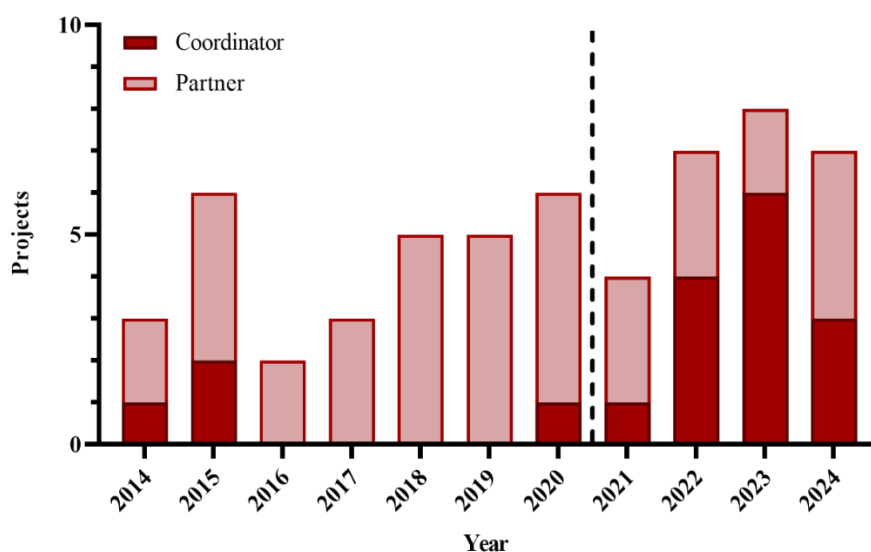
beyond its formal membership base. Thus, membership and active involvement in EAEA's governance structures are strong indicators of repeated collaboration, though not exclusive determinants.

Project engagement and project-based growth

Between 2014 and 2024, EAEA participated in a total of 56 projects, as noted. Of these, 18 were coordinated by EAEA, while the organisation took part as a partner in the remaining 38 projects (see Figure 2).

Although EAEA's coordinating role has increased notably in recent years, especially from 2022 onwards, the majority of EAEA's engagements continue to be in the capacity of a contributing partner. It is important to note that, due to incomplete data from the K3 project overviews for the funding period 2021-2027 (see the Methodology section), we do not know whether EAEA was involved in additional projects as a contributing partner between 2021 and 2024. Therefore, the actual number of partner organisations during these years may be even higher than reported in this paper.

Figure 2. EAEA's project engagement and type of participation (the dashed line represents the two different programming periods) (source: authors' own figure)



As illustrated in Figure 2, while the number of projects varied slightly from year to year, there is a clear and strengthened upward trend in EAEA's overall project involvement, especially in recent years. During the mid- and late-2010s, EAEA engaged in relatively few projects annually. For instance, only 3 projects in 2014 and 2 in 2016. However, from 2020 onwards, by the end of the previous programming period in the EU, EAEA's activity level increased noticeably, as evidenced by both its growing participation in EU-funded projects and its expanding role as a project coordinator (see Figure 1). This despite a slight dip in 2021, which could be the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and its disruptions on institutional work and networking, the annual number of projects consistently rose, in the new programming period, reaching 7 in 2022, 8 in 2023, and again 7 in 2024. This increase in project involvement not only highlights EAEA's growing presence within the EU funding ecosystem but also demonstrates its expanding willingness and capacity to

network effectively, navigate the funding system, and coordinate initiatives that successfully secure external financing.

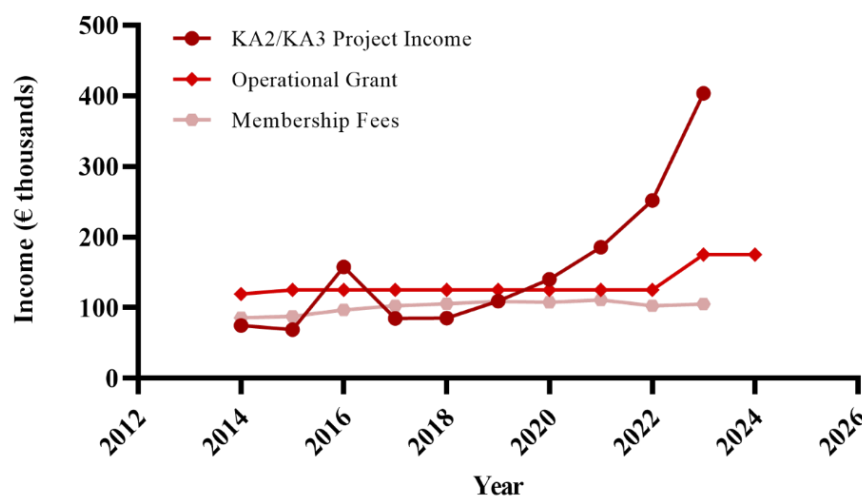
Funding structure and financial dependencies

A further analysis of EAEA's financial reports reveals three principal sources of income for the organisation (see Figure 3): a fixed annual operating grant from the EU, membership fees, and project-based funding. The EU contribution has not been discontinued, serving as a consistent financial backbone. Moreover, it increased from €100,000 in 2014 to €175,000 in 2024, also thanks to the enlarged number of EAEA's paid staff, a criterion for funds allocation. Yet further financial growth or expansion of EAEA's activities depends on increases in membership contributions and, most importantly, the successful acquisition of project funding.

Membership fees have shown a steady upward trend, rising from €85,830 in 2014 to a peak of €111,114 in 2021, followed by a decline to €102,547 in 2022. Although data for 2023 and 2024 are currently unavailable, the overall trajectory since 2014 indicates a significant increase. This trend may reflect an increasing institutional outreach attracting a growing number of member organisations.

In contrast, annual income from project funding demonstrates significant year-to-year variability. Beginning at €74,593 in 2014, it dropped slightly in 2015 but then rose sharply to €157,735 in 2016. After some fluctuation between 2017 and 2019, project income increased markedly to €140,201 in 2020. This trajectory points to an increasing institutional reliance on externally funded projects. The pronounced rise in project income suggests strategic efforts to position EAEA within the EU funding ecosystem and to strengthen its capacity to mobilise resources, build partnerships, and align with EU policy priorities. A further surge occurred from €185,569 in 2021 to €403,375 in 2023, before stabilising (2024 data not available at time of data gathering). This sustained growth indicates EAEA's adaptability to evolving funding landscapes. Taken together, these financial patterns underline the importance of, and dependency on, project funding to EAEA's operational model and highlight the risks and opportunities embedded in its increasing dependence on EU-funded initiatives (see also Milana, 2024).

Figure 3. EAEA's sources of income (source: authors' own figure)



In addition to income trends, the management reports also include annual liabilities, a portion of which being from ongoing EU projects. These sums represent EU project funds received in advance but not yet fully implemented or reported and therefore appear as liabilities in the accounts. In this article, we refer to them as *deferred project income*. Although they are not part of the annual income, they provide important insights into EAEA's financial structure. The data show a marked increase over time: from €108,025 in 2014 to a peak of €713,559 in 2020, before contracting to €349,755 in 2021. This decline may reflect the disruption of project cycles during the transition between Erasmus+ programming periods. The deferred project income then grew again in subsequent years, reaching €787,216 in 2023, underlining EAEA's continued success in securing externally funded projects. These rising figures offer a glimpse of EAEA's growing role as a manager of EU funds. Taken together, the trajectory of project income and pre-funded projects points to an increasing reliance on EU projects as a central component of EAEA's operational model and strategic development.

Furthermore, as previously noted, EAEA has predominantly participated as a partner rather than a coordinator in most of the examined projects. This suggests that EAEA's project-based growth is not only financially dependent on securing external funding but also institutionally reliant on maintaining and expanding its collaborative networks, particularly through strong relationships with member organisations (cf. Milana & Tronca, 2026). Its participation often depends on other institutions taking the lead in initiating and coordinating project consortia, which also implies that strategic selection and engagement of members are crucial for continued involvement. This positioning highlights both the importance of sustained partnerships and a potential structural vulnerability, as EAEA's inclusion in projects is frequently contingent upon external invitations and leadership, rather than internal initiation and control.

Discussion and conclusion

Building on theoretical and empirical insights from the available literature, this study paid attention to EAEA, the oldest Brussels-based NGO with a vested interest in adult education and learning. We departed from two assumptions. First, the network of relations in which Brussels-based NGOs are involved is an important asset for their policy advocacy. Second, the project engagement of Brussels-based NGOs is instrumental for their policy advocacy. So, this study investigated EAEA's participation in EU-funded projects and the cultivation of transnational networks of collaboration that come with it, as a form of policy advocacy.

The findings show that, when it comes to EAEA's engagement in EU-funded projects either as coordinator or partner, there has been a significant growth over the past decade. This growth is closely linked to its ability to build and maintain networks, collaborate effectively with organisations sharing similar interests and agendas, mobilise resources, and align with EU policies to secure Erasmus+ KA2 and KA3 projects. Most collaborative relations through project engagement occurred with organisations with which EAEA holds formal relations through membership, and in many cases, involved organisations that have been represented in EAEA's formal governance structure. This may not come as a surprise, as it is likely that organisations that know each other through formal relations are keener to collaborate further, and more likely to partner in bids for collaborative projects. At the same time, collective projects can help EAEA, its member organisations, and affiliated members to collaborate towards shared goals. Our finding is in line with Stevens (2025), who argues that cooperation with other organisations consistently enhances advocacy effectiveness and NGOs tend to be more collaborative

when compared to other interest groups. From a meta-organisation perspective, cooperation through project work reinforces the production of information and best practices to which NGOs are primarily devoted (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). Moreover, cooperation can be seen as a strategy to avoid the emergence of potential conflicts among member organisations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). Whereas, from a network governance perspective, joint project engagement can also help to reinforce existing networks of relations, connect among them organisations that would otherwise not be connected, and produce larger and more reliable sources of evidence for policy advocacy at the European and country levels.

Based on the findings, over the period under consideration (2014-2024), the engagement of EAEA in EU-funded projects has indeed evolved. Overall, EAEA coordinated only 18 out of 56 projects over the past decade. Interestingly, however, its role as coordinator has increased in the new programming period (2021-2024) along with a steady growth in project involvement. Importantly, EAEA's successful pursuit of, and financial reliance on, externally funded projects over the past ten years remains undeniable. This result comes in agreement with previous literature arguing that engaging in projects has become a priority (Mikulec & Kristl, 2025; Milana, 2024). Following Junk (2024), collaboration through projects that are publicly funded can be considered a survival-seeking strategy to secure resources to stay in operation. Hence, collaborative projects can be seen as a form of collaboration that supports 'the relationship building and creative problem-solving NGOs engage in to achieve certain goals' (AbouAssi et al., 2016, p. 436). But project organisation is not a neutral tool or merely a technical means of structuring collaborative work. Instead, funding projects from the EU side can also function as a managerial practice and a form of governance that introduces new hierarchies, accountability mechanisms, and relations of control within organisations and across policy fields (Büttner & Leopold, 2016). Broadly speaking, EAEA opposes the growing use of managerial practices in adult education and advocates for stable, long-term funding rather than project-based support. Its increasing involvement in EU-funded projects could therefore be interpreted as a form of organisational 'hypocrisy' (Brunsson, 1989), highlighting a gap between what the organisation says, decides, and does. However, rather than viewing this inconsistency as purely negative, it can be understood as a normal, and sometimes necessary, feature of complex organisations, representing a pragmatic trade-off in pursuing its mission.

A key issue emerging from the analysis concerns the increasing impact of project engagement on EAEA's budget. Based on our estimates, the year-by-year fluctuation in income sources come primarily from project funding. When it comes to the relation between EAEA's project engagement and its network of relations, the findings indicate that EAEA is more likely to focus on strengthening its collaborations and expanding its network with existing members – both ordinary and associate – as well as with affiliated organisations, such as the LLLP and ICAE. Hence, EAEA relies on externally funded projects and on networking for the continuing growth of the organisation. Both aspects are in line with previous and ongoing analyses. For instance, in examining the organisational features of two Brussels-based NGOs, Milana (2024) found that in 2022 increased project funding raised to three-quarters the amount of EU funding in the annual budgets of the organisations under study. Meanwhile, active collaborations with other organisations, like project engagement, can help Brussels-based NGOs to advocate for European education and possibly exert pressure on EU institutions (see, for instance, Milana & Tronca, 2026).

This leads us to wonder how the increasing reliance on externally funded projects might impact EU-EAEA relations in terms of donor (in)dependency (cf. Salgado, 2010;

Ketola, 2016; Koubek, 2020). Further, we also wonder how continuously seeking collaborations, as required by multi-organisational projects, may shape the governance and inform the policy advocacy of Brussels-based NGOs like EAEA. We see this as an opportunity for strengthening their reach and influencing policy-decision making at EU level. At the same time one could question the organisational autonomy and its limits. As EAEA navigates between networking for policy influence and simultaneously securing funding, often from funding programs like Erasmus+ with their own strategic goals, the organisation must balance advocacy independence with the constraints imposed by its funders. This tension can affect the organisation's ability to set its own priorities and pursue long-term goals independently. In fact, drawing on resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), funders may prioritise organisations that do not critically engage with them. Furthermore, research on NGO's leaders points toward them being reluctant to engage critically with public entities in fear of compromising funding (Onyx et al., 2008). Yet, empirical evidence also shows that NGOs that are either confrontational or in alignment with the funders' agendas have an equal chance of obtaining EU funds (Crepaz & Hanegraaff, 2022) and that 'EU funding does not have a dampening effect' on NGOs political advocacy (Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017, p. 419). Still, the European Parliament raises some concerns about the effect the financial accountability of EU funding for NGOs, as well as the significant time spent on reporting and compliance, can have on advocacy or policy engagement outcomes (Ackermann et al., 2023). In brief, in balancing the pursuit of funding with the aim of influencing EU policy, there are potential risks of co-optation by EU institutions, particularly regarding EAEA's ability to maintain its relative autonomy in advocacy and its capacity to advance independent claims.

Still, the results of our study should be read with caution. Given the gaps and absences in the data already mentioned, it would be interesting to revisit the dataset at the conclusion of the 2021-2027 funding cycle, once full records become available. Doing so could reveal additional patterns, clarify gaps, and offer an even more comprehensive picture of EAEA's project engagement over time. The data limitation leads to a second limitation, namely, the study's reliance on secondary sources. While EAEA's own documentation and public Erasmus+ databases offer a valuable and comprehensive picture of the organisation's engagement in projects, they do not provide access to internal perspectives and first-hand insights. As such, nuanced and contextual dimensions, such as the motivations behind project participation, internal decision-making processes, and broader strategic priorities, could not be explored. Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the understanding of publicly financed collaborative projects as an underexplored tool for policy advocacy, and advances knowledge on the mobilisation of Brussels-based NGOs. At the same time, it raises questions such as how collaborative projects support Brussels-based NGOs in enhancing their networks of relations and supporting their survival strategy, as well as how EU-funded projects affect their organisational structures and may hinder their independence for policy advocacy. Further research could enrich this type of analysis and provide a more nuanced understanding of the effects of EU-funded projects on Brussel-based NGOs and their advocacy capacity.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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