

EARLALL

European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning **A History of Transnational Cooperation in Lifelong Learning (2001–2024)**

1. Origins and Founding Vision (2001–2003)

The European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning (EARLALL) was established in 2001, on the initiative of nine regional governments. Notably, the founding coalition included territories outside the borders of the European Union, giving the network an international character from its very first day.

The political backdrop was the Lisbon Strategy of March 2000, which set the ambitious goal of making Europe the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. EARLALL's founding regions shared a conviction: that the success of that macro-European strategy depended on the capacity to translate broad objectives into the concrete realities of specific territories. Because education and training competences were decentralised at the regional level, the regions had a strong stake in European policy — yet their voice was still largely mediated by national governments. EARLALL was created precisely to change that.

★ **MILESTONE 2001** *EARLALL founded by nine regional governments — including non-EU territories — as a platform for regions to engage directly with European lifelong learning policy.*

From its first General Assembly in 2002, EARLALL adopted a biennial strategy to formulate recommendations to the European Commission regarding the future generation of educational programmes. The association integrated itself into the official consultation process for the 2007–2013 programming period, bringing forward concrete proposals on the geographical coverage and structure of the programmes. These proposals were developed by the regional ministers and councillors responsible for education and labour policy — giving them an authoritative, politically backed character.

At the 2003 Assembly in Palma de Mallorca, EARLALL articulated a foundational argument: regional centres constitute the key engines of growth. Creating jobs at the local level, it was argued, was more cost-effective than centralised national coordination, because of regions' granular knowledge of their communities' real needs.

2. Subsidiarity, New Governance, and the Cardiff Document (2002–2003)

EARLALL consistently championed the principle of subsidiarity — the idea that decisions affecting regions must be taken as close to the citizens as possible. The association called for greater regional ownership over EU educational programmes, and, as early as 2002, introduced the concept of 'tripartite agreements' between the Community, national authorities, and regional/local authorities (COM(2002) 709 final). This framework aligned closely with the European Commission's own White Paper on European Governance, which emphasised the role of sub-national authorities in applying Community rules.

★ **MILESTONE 2003** *The Cardiff Document — co-authored by EARLALL and the 18 associated regional governments — calls for dedicated Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs) under the European Social Fund, explicitly linking cohesion policy to lifelong learning and active labour market policies.*

The Cardiff Document, adopted in 2003, was a landmark political statement. Building on Article 158 of the European Treaty, which focused cohesion policy on regions rather than individual States, EARLALL and its then-18 member regions demanded that European Social Fund (ESF) support be implemented through specific Regional Operational Programmes dedicated to the knowledge society. The demands were concrete and forward-looking:

- Operational programmes calibrated to local realities rather than national averages;
- Integration between labour and vocational training policies;
- Pervasive use of new technologies;
- Improvement of employment support services;
- Promotion of international cooperation.

3. Transnationality, Bilateral Agreements, and the Lifelong Learning Programme (2004–2013)

4. A Strategy of Transnational Cooperation (2004–2006)

From 2004 onward, EARLALL actively promoted guidelines to support transnational cooperation. An action plan led to bilateral agreements between member regional governments, focused on two main directions:

- **Facilitating the movement of students, trainees, researchers, and workers across regional borders.** Transregional Mobility
- **Promoting voluntary coordination between regional and local governments to develop and align new lifelong learning policies.** Open Method of Coordination (OMC)

Through this work, EARLALL consolidated its role as a genuine platform for exchanging policy models — including best practices such as dual education systems and early career orientation frameworks — that regions could adapt and adopt.

5. The Lifelong Learning Programme 2007–2013

★ **MILESTONE 2007** *The EU's Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) 2007–2013 brings previously fragmented actions under a single framework. EARLALL's earlier advocacy for greater programme coherence and regional participation is reflected in the new architecture. From this year, interregional cooperation becomes an incentivised component within the ESF.*

In 2003, EARLALL had already adopted a 'Common Statement' in Palma, calling for greater attention to the widespread dissemination and exploitation of project results funded by EU programmes. With the LLP in place, the association promoted guidelines for regional OMC, facilitating processes of policy learning and policy transfer between its member regions.

6. Post-2013 Strategies: Fund Integration, Youth Employment, and Digital Transition

7. Preparing for the 2014–2020 Period

Around 2010, EARLALL's technical working groups began drafting orientations for the post-2013 European funding period. A key priority was establishing solid programmatic links between regional development funds (ERDF) and the ESF — enabling a more integrated approach to economic and social development at the regional level. Regions also intensified mutual learning on entrepreneurial learning and on building competences for temporary and flexible workers, anticipating new labour market realities.

8. The Sovereign Debt Crisis and the Youth Guarantee

The sovereign debt crisis placed youth unemployment at the top of the European political agenda. When Herman Van Rompuy, then President of the European Council, promoted the 'Youth Guarantee', EARLALL worked to ensure that special measures for young people — spanning education, skills, and housing — were integrated across policy sectors rather than siloed within a single programme.

In parallel, EARLALL regions analysed youth policy through the One Step Ahead (OSA) project, which took a horizontal approach to tackling NEETs (young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training). OSA's pillars encompassed not only completion of education and professional growth, but also social

disadvantage, cultural development, housing independence, and income support — a holistic vision of young people’s transition to adulthood.

9. The Basque Country Presidency: Consolidation and European Leadership (2015–2024)

From 2015, the Basque Country assumed the presidency of EARLALL, ushering in nearly a decade of sustained institutional growth and heightened European visibility. Operating through a joint team — the EARLALL Secretariat and the Basque Government’s VET Regional Vice-Minister and Delegation to the EU — the network became a recognised front-runner on the EU skills and education agenda.

10. Institutional Strengthening

★ **MILESTONE c.2015–2020** *The EARLALL Secretariat grows from a single staff member to a dedicated team of three, unlocking new capacity for advocacy, project participation, and peer learning.*

During this period, EARLALL undertook a significant governance reform, adapting its Statutes and introducing a new membership category. These changes strengthened the association’s decision-making processes and made it more agile in responding to rapidly evolving challenges in education and training.

11. Advocacy and EU Policy Influence

Advocacy remained a central pillar throughout the Basque presidency. Key contributions included:

- Responding to the new Skills Agenda and the Pact for Skills, positioning EARLALL as an active contributor to EU-level skills policy;
- Contributing to the evaluation of Erasmus+ and other EU funding programmes;
- Joining significant EU platforms — the Pact for Skills, the Harnessing Talent Platform, and the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition — opening doors for meaningful contributions to EU policies and initiatives.

12. COVID-19: Resilience and Digital Adaptation

★ **MILESTONE 2020** *The COVID-19 pandemic triggers an unprecedented challenge. EARLALL rapidly adapts to the virtual world, revises its priorities, and maintains its mission without interruption — demonstrating the network’s institutional resilience.*

The pandemic proved a stress test for the entire European education and training ecosystem. EARLALL’s swift shift to digital formats allowed it to continue peer learning, advocacy, and project work, and reinforced the relevance of its focus on digital skills and online learning.

13. The European Year of Skills and Key Themes

★ **MILESTONE June 2023** *EARLALL organises a High-Level event as part of the European Year of Skills, demonstrating the network’s convening power and reinforcing the centrality of regions in shaping the future of skills and lifelong learning across Europe.*

Throughout this period, EARLALL explored and addressed the most pressing topics of its time, including:

- Vocational excellence and the reform of VET systems;
- Skills for the green transition and the digital transition;
- Mobility — building on EARLALL’s long-standing commitment to transregional mobility;
- Inclusion — ensuring that lifelong learning reaches those furthest from the labour market.

A renewed communications strategy, including an updated website, strengthened EARLALL’s visibility on the European stage and better showcased the innovative practices of its member regions.

14. Strengthened Partnerships

The Basque presidency was also marked by deepened collaboration with key EU institutions and international organisations, including the Committee of the Regions, UNESCO, and the OECD, as well as major European networks. This multilateral positioning allowed EARLALL to amplify its members’ expertise and needs at the highest levels of EU and global policy debate. The network also expanded its participation in European projects, from Erasmus+ to Horizon Europe.

15.A New Chapter: The Västra Götaland Presidency and the Union of Skills (2025–)

As the Basque Country concluded its decade-long presidency, EARLALL entered a new phase under the leadership of Region Västra Götaland. This transition also coincided with a pivotal moment in European policy: the emergence of the 'Union of Skills' as the overarching framework shaping education and training across the continent, and the opening of negotiations for the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034. EARLALL's ability to act quickly and speak with a credible regional voice has never mattered more.

16. The Union of Skills: Regions at the Heart of a European Priority

The Union of Skills initiative, rooted in the Draghi Report's diagnosis that skills and productivity lie at the heart of European competitiveness, rapidly became the defining policy reference for EARLALL's advocacy work in 2025. EARLALL engaged across every available channel: it contributed to the Committee of the Regions' consultation on the Union of Skills strategy, participated in the OECD–Committee of the Regions Event on role of regions for adult learning, and held a direct advocacy meeting at the Cabinet of Commissioner Minzatu in March 2025 to argue for a stronger regional role in the strategy's implementation.

The association's core message has been consistent: regions and local authorities are not merely implementers of EU skills policy — they are its architects at the ground level. Without meaningful regional ownership, the Union of Skills risks remaining an ambition on paper rather than a transformation in practice. To sharpen this advocacy, EARLALL launched a dedicated Policy Task Force in March 2025.

★ **MILESTONE March 2025** EARLALL launches its Policy Task Force and holds a high-level advocacy meeting at the Cabinet of Commissioner Minzatu — positioning the network as a key regional voice in shaping the Union of Skills strategy.

17. The MFF 2028–2034 Negotiations: Defending Regional Funding for Lifelong Learning

The negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework represent one of the most consequential exercises that EARLALL is tackling. At stake is not only the future of Erasmus+ and the European Social Fund+, but also the very principle of a distinct regional dimension in European education and training policy.

EARLALL submitted a formal position paper on Erasmus+ in the MFF 2028–2035 in April 2025, and signed a joint statement on the European Social Fund+, calling for the preservation of decentralised programme structures and meaningful co-management by regional authorities. EARLALL also responded to the European Commission's public consultation on the next long-term budget (February–May 2025), insisting that any renationalisation or centralisation of education and training funds would undermine two decades of progress in building regional capacity for lifelong learning.

★ **MILESTONE April 2025** EARLALL publishes its position paper on Erasmus+ in the MFF 2028–2035, calling for a decentralised, regionally anchored programme structure — one of the network's most significant formal advocacy outputs.

On 28 January 2026, EARLALL participated in a stakeholder dialogue at the European Parliament on the Education and Skills component of Erasmus+, invited directly by the Rapporteur — a mark of the network's recognised standing in this legislative process. EARLALL subsequently submitted proposed amendments by mid-February 2026.

The results were significant. The European Parliament's CULT Committee draft report on the future Erasmus+, prepared by Rapporteur MEP Bogdan Zdrojewski, largely incorporated EARLALL's proposed amendments — and the role of the regional and local level was explicitly acknowledged in the text. This is a tangible legislative outcome.

★ **MILESTONE January–June 2026** EARLALL's proposed Erasmus+ amendments are substantially taken up by the EP CULT Committee Rapporteur — a direct legislative impact, with the regional and local role explicitly written into the draft report.

18. Regions Under Pressure: The Strategic Value of Alliances

The broader political context in 2025 and 2026 has been sobering for regional authorities. In this environment, EARLALL has doubled down on its strategy of building alliances. Working alongside the Lifelong Learning Platform (of which it is a member), the Committee of the Regions' SEDEC committee, and partners such as Cedefop, the OECD, and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, EARLALL has helped forge a coalition of voices insisting that skills policy must remain rooted in territorial realities. The jointly established European Parliament Intergroup on the Future of Education and Skills for a Competitive Europe (IG10-14), joined in December 2024 as part of the LLLP, provides a new cross-party parliamentary forum through which these arguments can reach legislators directly.

A further illustration of EARLALL's alliance-building in practice came in 2026, when the network joined a Joint Open Letter on the Future EU Budget organised by ERRIN and EURADA, defending cohesion policy and the Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) instrument. EARLALL endorsed the letter while also making explicit its own specific perspective: that Smart Specialisation should be understood not only as an innovation and industrial framework, but equally as a territorial reference for aligning skills systems with regional economic strategies. Labour markets and value chains are territorial realities; the interaction between enterprises, VET providers, and public authorities takes place at regional level.

19. Capacity Building and Projects: A Network in Full Activity

Against this advocacy backdrop, EARLALL's day-to-day network activity continued to expand in 2024-2026. The EARLALL Academy — now in its third year — delivered expert sessions on topics ranging from AI and inclusion in adult education to youth voices in policy and mobility for learners with fewer opportunities, attracting over 260 participants since its launch. Sectoral skills analysis webinars explored challenges and opportunities in textiles, cultural and creative industries, advanced manufacturing, tourism, clean energy, etc — mobilising member regions in a structured exchange of labour market intelligence. On the project side, EARLALL ran nine funded projects simultaneously across Erasmus+, Interreg Europe, Horizon Europe, and the ESF+, and submitted new project proposals in 2025 and 2026.

The network also welcomed Castilla y León as a new full member, and facilitated bilateral exchanges through the EARLALL Mobility Matchmaking Tool — a practical instrument that directly connects regional practitioners across borders for structured peer learning visits.

★ **MILESTONE 2024/25** EARLALL runs 9 simultaneous EU-funded projects, launches 3 new ones, submits 10 project proposals, and delivers 5 Academy sessions — the most active project and capacity-building period in the network's history.

20. Looking Ahead

The history of EARLALL reveals a trajectory of constant growth — from a small coalition of nine pioneering regions to an indispensable network in European education and training policy. What began as a response to the Lisbon Strategy's ambitions has evolved into a key advocacy and peer-learning organisation, capable of publishing position papers, mobilising cross-institutional coalitions, co-designing EU consultations, and running a portfolio of concurrent funded projects.

The coming years will test the network's resilience and strategic intelligence. The MFF 2028–2034 negotiations will determine whether the regional dimension of European skills policy is strengthened or hollowed out. The Union of Skills framework, still being shaped, could either empower regions as genuine architects of lifelong learning — or reduce them to delivery mechanisms for centrally designed programmes. EARLALL's task is to ensure the former outcome prevails.

The network's founding conviction — that decisions affecting people's education and working lives must be taken as close to them as possible, by authorities that know their communities, their economies, and their specific challenges — remains as relevant today as it was in 2001. After twenty-five years, EARLALL carries that conviction into an ever more complex European landscape, armed with deeper partnerships, a stronger evidence base, and a membership that spans the breadth of the continent.

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