



ET 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning

Report on a seminar on achieving coherent adult learning policy

Brussels 23-24 November 2014

This paper provides a report of key activities, and messages arising from a Policy Coherence seminar organised by the ET 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning. This seminar was jointly hosted by the BE(Fr) and BE(NI) Ministries and attended by representatives from 15 countries: Belgium (Fr), Belgium (NI), Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia and Iceland. The seminar built upon a key finding of the country workshop in October which analysed basic skills policies and identified policy coherence as a strong factor in effective policies. BE (Fr), PT, NL presented Adult Learning (AL) policy examples, focusing on ways to ensure coherence between AL and other policy areas. Based on these three country/regional case studies and focused discussions, participants investigated a number of coherence-related challenges and success factors. This investigation was undertaken within the context of broader challenges facing adult learning, such as the diverse, highly diffuse nature of the sector.

This paper first summarises a presentation of policy coherence-related findings from the in-depth country workshop held in Stuttgart, Germany on 26-29 October 2014. The paper then summarises key messages from the three countries/regional case studies presented at the Brussels seminar. Following this, the paper turns to a group discussion focused on the factors supporting policy coherence. Finally, the paper concludes with take-home messages from the seminar. The seminar programme is included in an appendix.

Policy context

The Working Group on Adult Learning is focusing its efforts on addressing three policy challenges: 1) improving adults' literacy and numeracy; 2) increasing the coherence and effectiveness of adult education policies and; 3) improving adults' digital skills. Improving policy coherence will enable governments to use resources more effectively and efficiently and to more effectively reach out to all target groups.^{1,2} More coherent, efficient and effective policies will, in turn, increase the likelihood of continued investment in adult education.

¹ European Commission. Directorate-General for Education and Culture. 2014. ET 2020 Working Group. WG on Adult Learning. Mandate.

Policy coherence and basic skills policy: key messages from an in-depth workshop

Just as achieving coherent policy is an important issue across a broad range of countries and policy domains, so too has it been a key feature of previous ET 2020 AL Working Group events. For example, while policy coherence was not formally listed as a key theme of the in-depth country workshop held in Stuttgart 26-29 October 2014, a review of the notes from that workshop revealed that a number of countries/regions highlighted the importance of and challenges to policy coherence. In turn, the achievement of policy coherence was cited as a key success factor. The Brussels seminar on achieving coherent adult learning policy therefore **began with an analysis of key coherence-related factors discussed in Stuttgart**. These factors were categorised under three overarching headings: chronological coherence, systemic coherence, and cross-organisational coherence.

Chronological coherence refers to policy developments that take appropriate account of the full policy life-cycle, from initial design and development through to implementation, evaluation, and alteration in light of evidence and experience. **Systemic coherence** emphasises the importance of interrelated and well integrated institutions and structures. For example, the Mannheim (Baden-Württemberg) “Schools and basic education” project seeks to facilitate systemic coherence by filling an educational gap. In particular, this programme focuses on adults who have completed primary education but who lack the literacy and numeracy skills to move on to secondary-level education. Through the “Schools and basic education” project, these adults are supported to improve their basic skills so that they can progress on to secondary education. Furthermore, to reduce institutional, situational and dispositional barriers to progression, learners in this programme are able to progress on to secondary-level education at the same institution where they have improved their basic skills.

The Mannheim programme also provides an example of **cross-organisational coherence** – that is, cooperation, coordination and partnership across a range of policy areas and organisations. In the Mannheim case, learning centres partner with job centres to identify adults with basic skills needs and to facilitate learning that may be relevant to the labour market.

At the in-depth Stuttgart country workshop, participants from a range of countries detailed a number of efforts at cross-organisational coherence, both within government and outside it, and both **vertical (e.g. coordination between national and local government) and horizontal (e.g. coordination between education and employment)**. A key emphasis from all countries was that, while cooperation is essential for policy coherence, it is not in itself sufficient. Cooperation can mean

² European Commission. 2013. Directorate-General for Research & Innovation. Adult and continuing education in Europe. Using public policy to secure a growth in skills. <http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/kina25943enc.pdf> assessed on 14.4.201, p.7

simply “not getting in the way”, and does not in itself imply shared policy ownership. For the latter, **partnership** is required.

Analysis of the Stuttgart workshop revealed a number of **success factors** related to policy coherence. Encouragingly, most of these same success factors were independently highlighted by presenters at the Brussels seminar on achieving coherent adult learning policy. Some key issues detailed in Stuttgart included **challenges associated with getting policy partners on board**. Such partners could include ministries for employment, health and social services at national, regional and local levels; they might also include employers and NGOs. In Stuttgart, countries discussed a **need to “brand” adult learning policies** – not just to make them attractive to adults themselves, but also to make them attractive to potential policy partners. In doing so, it is essential to show **evidence of need** for skills improvement (e.g. through PIAAC results) and to **demonstrate the gains** that potential partners are likely to experience as a result of adult learning. However, in many countries efforts at demonstrating these potential gains are hampered by a lack of rigorous evidence of impact. As the Commission has highlighted on a number of occasions,³ these research gaps need to be filled.

Even with robust evidence and strong policy will, there are **numerous barriers to policy coherence**. Joined-up policy-making is difficult. For example, if an adult learning policy has educational, employment, health related and social welfare aspects and outcomes, **which policy partner drives the agenda?** How are funding commitments distributed? Presenters and discuss at the Brussels seminar addressed these and other important questions. The following section summarises key points from case studies provided by three countries/regions: Belgium (Fr), Portugal and the Netherlands.

National/regional case studies

Belgium (Fr): Programme for the Validation of Skills

Colleagues from Belgium (Fr) introduced an idea that would prove to form a **key theme of the seminar: the interaction between top-down and bottom-up policy processes**. It was suggested that in Be (Fr), the key triggers for policy development typically come from the field, i.e. from the front lines of programmes (bottom-up). Good practice then filters upward, influences policy, and then is disseminated back downward, where it can spread horizontally. Policymakers learn from the field, i.e. front-line practitioners, and then support the spread of good practices throughout that field. Policy in Be (Fr) is also influenced from the top down. In particular, **EU policy guidance** is seen as having a powerful influence in this region.

³ E.g. European Council Communication from the Commission. Adult Learning: It Is Never Too Late to Learn, COM (2006), 614.

A mediating factor in these bottom-up and top-down processes is the region's **highly complex policy structure**, with ministries in the two French-speaking community governments (in Wallonia and Brussels) and the regional governments all playing a role in policy development, implementation and funding. This highly complex political structure introduces unique challenges into the policy process. However, it was also argued that having a large number of policy stakeholders **encourages partnership efforts and can improve policy sustainability**, by making all stakeholders feel they have something to gain from policy, and something to lose if the policy fails. This inculcates a sense of **ownership**. However, such ownership/partnership is not inevitable; it must be worked at. Other countries provided examples of situations in which having a number of potential policy owners meant that no one organisation or ministry stepped forward to drive the agenda. This is one example of the **difference between mere cooperation and true partnership**.

In addition to addressing overarching challenges and success factors, Be (Fr)'s discussion of policy coherence focused on one specific case study: The **Programme for Validation of Skills**. PowerPoints describing this programme, which focuses on the recognition and validation of job-related technical skills, are available on Yammer, and will not be described in detail in this report. (Presentations for the other two case studies are also available on Yammer.) However, a few key points will be highlighted.

First, despite (or perhaps because of) the highly complex nature of policy-making in Belgium (Fr), great efforts are made to ensure that the end users (e.g. adults having their skills validated) are presented with a **simple, easily understandable interface**. Another key principle informing the Programme for Validation of Skills is that this programme should seek to facilitate cross-organisational ownership through **remaining small itself, but helping its partner organisations grow larger**. A central aim is to avoid any one policy organisation having a monopoly on the recognition and validation of skills; rather the **effort and interests should be shared across a range of stakeholders**, with quality assured through a **well regulated system of stakeholder certification**. These efforts have met with success. However, a number of challenges continue to exist (and to be addressed). These include **challenges** highlighted by other countries at the Stuttgart in-depth workshop, such as the need for more, and more reliable, evidence of impact.

Portugal: The rise and fall of the New Opportunities Initiative

As with the Belgian (Fr) example, Portugal's New Opportunities Initiative focused on several education and training measures but priority was given to **recognising and validating adults' skills**. It did so in a context of relatively low qualification levels in Portugal, with 72% of the labour force lacking secondary-level qualifications.

The New Opportunities Initiative (NOI) sought to achieve these objectives through a **large, comprehensive and coherent policy effort**, involving a broad range of stakeholders, high levels of vertical and horizontal integration, and world-leading

efforts at public participation. These policy efforts, while marking a new, more ambitious phase in Portuguese policy-making, were **influenced by earlier policies**, including the creation of a national agency for adult education and training. New Opportunities also **built on earlier efforts** at recognising and validating prior learning; the policy did not arise without prior development. The NOI, which ran from 2005 to 2010, therefore displayed an important level of **chronological policy coherence**. However, it expanded upon these earlier efforts greatly – for example, by seeking **structural coherence** through the creation of a national qualification system.

Policymakers also sought a high degree of **vertical and horizontal cross-organisational coherence**, e.g. through local qualification networks and agreements with social partners for vocational training reforms. The government also created a **policy body to coordinate adult learning policies**, with this body working under the umbrella of both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour. An additional layer of coherence was inherent in the very nature of any policy aimed at recognition of prior learning: such approaches are typically more **coherent with adult learners' lives** and interests, than are policies based on long, classroom-based courses. However, the NOI did not ignore the importance of classroom-based education, offering opportunities for **combining recognition of prior learning with education** and training aimed at improving skills.

The **goals of New Opportunities were extremely ambitious**, and included an aim to help 1 million adults achieve at least upper secondary education qualification, out of a total national population of approximately 10 million. Over the seven-year life of the policy, these efforts led to the creation of 451 New Opportunities Centres throughout the country, and the participation of more than 1.4 million adults, with more than 770,000 of these embarked upon basic education levels and nearly 650,000 participating in secondary education-level pathways. By 2011, more than 450,000 Portuguese adults had achieved some type of certification recognising prior learning, with more than 330,000 achieving a basic level certification and nearly 125,000 achieving a secondary certification.

Ultimately, however, the New Opportunities Initiative fell even faster than it had risen. A **number of factors contributed to the policy's demise** – most importantly, political changes and the fact that public opinion became very critical towards the Initiative. Other factors included the extreme economic crisis faced by Portugal, a high level of dependence on the European Social Fund (ESF), and difficulties in realising the policy's hoped-for **labour market impacts**. These impacts were particularly difficult to achieve during a period of spiralling, exogenously driven unemployment.

Since 2011, Portugal has continued its efforts to recognise and validate prior learning, albeit in a much scaled down manner.

Netherlands: Language for Life

Colleagues from the Netherlands discussed the Language for Life policy, which is being **implemented in six regions** of the country. This policy had also been discussed at the Stuttgart in-depth country workshop. At that earlier workshop, **policy coherence was cited as both a key challenge and a key success factor**. In particular, there was an emphasis upon **cross-organisational partnership**: in the Netherlands, the government works closely with an NGO (the Reading and Writing Foundation) to design, implement and govern a low literacy action programme. Within government, there are strong efforts to achieve **political consensus and ownership across a range of ministries**. The Netherlands also emphasised another type of coherence: that between a policy's **objectives** and its available **resources**.

All of these coherence-related factors have impacts on policy, with some impacts having both a positive and negative aspect. For example, in working with the Reading and Writing Foundation, the Netherlands government benefits from that NGO's high level of understanding of basic skills issues, and its years of experience addressing the issue. However, such a partnership can create challenges for governments – for example, because the Reading and Writing Foundation has a high level of expertise, it also demands a high level of autonomy with regard to policy implementation. **Government must thus allow the NGO to be a true partner**, with fully shared policy ownership. The NGO is not just a vehicle for implementation and/or advice.

At the Brussels policy coherence seminar, the **Reading and Writing Foundation's programme manager** discussed programme implementation and coherence-related issues. One physical manifestation of the latter is the concept of **Local Literacy Hubs**: these are community-based centres based in libraries, hospitals and other public spaces, at which potential adult learners can find helpdesk volunteer tutors, and opportunities to receive guidance. They can also undergo literacy assessments. These Literacy Hubs manifest the partnership-based nature of the policy (because several local partners devote time, space, human or financial resources to the hubs), while also contributing to the broader objective of ensuring that **policy ambitions are concordant with policy resources**. By making use of civic spaces, the Language for Life programme makes efficient use of resources while maximising opportunities for public outreach.

These developments are taking place within a broader policy trend within the Netherlands of **decentralisation**, resulting in larger policy roles for municipalities and a more facilitative role for central government. For the Language for Life initiative, this has encouraged a combination of **bottom-up and top-down policy-making**. Looking at the former, there are increased efforts to create more effective local infrastructures for adult basic skills education. National policymakers and their partners then use rigorous research methods to **monitor and evaluate** results, note effective practices, and feed this information back to the local level.

Because of limited budgets, programme leaders must devote greater energy to building on and **integrating with local efforts and infrastructures**. While this is

challenging, it also improves the sense of shared policy ownership and integration. Furthermore, having strong partnerships with local stakeholders facilitates a better balance of programme demands and supply. That being said, while local stakeholders are seen as essential and influential partners in the Language for Life policy, they must work with the central government and its partners, and accept overall policy principles. For example, local partners must be willing to commit to the specific outcomes sought by national policymakers.

Throughout all these processes, there is a need for constant **feedback loops**, running both horizontally and vertically. Establishing and sustaining such loops is resource intensive, but does contribute to policy coherence. Such coherence, after all, must be worked that constantly if it is to be sustainable.

Group discussion – What factors support policy coherence?

Following these illuminative case studies, seminar participants engaged in focused discussions around the question of “**What factors facilitate policy cohesion?**” One key point arising from this discussion was that **cohesion is always a work in progress**. Because it is such a complex challenge, it is impossible to ever get policy cohesion “exactly right”; however, with consistent, shared effort, high levels of policy cohesion can be achieved. As noted in the Netherlands case study, such cohesion must be constantly worked at if it is to be sustained.

Constancy and consistency are also relevant to factors supporting cohesion. For example, monitoring and evaluation should focus not just on policy outcomes, it was argued, but also on **policy processes**. There is ample evidence in the research literature that complex, cross-organisational policies benefit from **feedback loops** based on process evaluation and monitoring⁴. Seminar attendees noted that such feedback loops could facilitate the bottom-up, top-down policy processes highlighted by the Belgium (Fr) case study. These processes, in turn can facilitate the dissemination and “**mainstreaming**” of **excellent local practices** throughout the policy landscape. This “landscape” can be very diverse, including not only labour market-related policies, but also those related to health, culture and other areas. A potential challenge faced in such situations is that of allowing for local flexibility and uniqueness, while ensuring consistent, top-down policy **governance**. Again, the important role of ongoing monitoring and evaluation was emphasised as a means of developing and maintaining vertical and horizontal feedback loops.

Other key issues related to monitoring and evaluation included:

- The potential benefits of adult learning drawing not only on monitoring of its own sector, but of potential partnership sectors such as employment and migration.

⁴ E.g. Stame, N. (2004). Theory-Based Evaluation and Types of Complexity. *Evaluation*, 10(1), 58–76.

- The importance of choosing appropriate policy **indicators**, and the potential need to adjust or replace such indicators as a policy or its context evolves. For example, Portugal’s New Opportunities Initiative was evaluated at least in part on its impact on labour market outcomes. Such impacts are extremely difficult to achieve during an unemployment crisis.
- The potential to **use evaluation results to recruit policy partners** – for example, by demonstrating positive impacts across a range of policy areas. However, a challenge in this area is the tension between relatively short-term policy cycles and the potential long term impacts of adult learning.

On a broader level, colleagues from Norway emphasised the potential benefits of **national policy agencies** such as Vox. Such extra-governmental organisations have the capacity to positively influence government policy. However, Norwegian colleagues also offered a warning: because **adult learning is such a broad, diffuse policy area**, it can be dangerous to speak of “adult learning policy”, as this could encourage a homogenised view of a highly heterogeneous sector. Policy approaches that are relevant for adults with basic skills needs are likely to be very different from those relevant to highly skilled technicians seeking to hone their skills further. That being said, there is a strong need for **cohesion across adult learning policies** – for example, integration of basic skills policies with Continuous Vocational Education and Training, and across Adult Learning more broadly.

Take-home messages

At the conclusion of the seminar, participants discussed the key policy coherence messages they would take back to their countries, or policy actions they would attempt to focus their efforts on. While each policy context is different, there was a large deal of overlap in terms of key messages and potential actions.

A number of participants focused on the overarching objective of **building policy networks** and forging **horizontal and vertical alliances**. One participant noted that in their own country, adult learning policy is underdeveloped, and such networks are not yet institutionalised. Instead, networks are **dependent upon individuals’ interests and initiative**. The central importance of I’s – Individuals and their own Interests and Initiative – is clearly more fragile than policy based on S’s: **Systems and Structures**. That said, there is a hope that interested individuals in some countries can learn from the systems and structures in other countries, thus speeding policy development and improving its quality.

Another key message to be taken home was the importance of **partnership**, not just cooperation. And within partnership, it was emphasised that **all stakeholders should help to drive policy forward**. Some countries indicated that they had **formal structures** in place to encourage this sense of shared ownership and direction, even in the face of disparate policy agendas. Other countries said that they would like to develop such formal structures. **PIAAC** was pointed to as a policy lever that has the potential to unite otherwise disparate organisations, as it provides strong, clear evidence of basic skills problems and the need to address them. These are messages

that many stakeholders take for granted, but which may be new to potential partners in areas such as employment and health.

Other key messages and potential actions included a greater emphasis on ensuring that policymakers **learn from front-line practice**, and then supported to facilitate the dissemination of successful practices.

Appendix: Seminar programme

Education and Training 2020
Working Group on Adult Learning

Seminar

Brussels 23 - 24 November 2014

Sunday, November 23

Hotel Bloom, Rue Royale 250 Brussels

	Arrivals	
19.00	Welcome meal in Hotel Bloom, hosted by Ministère de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles and Vlaamse Overheid – Department Onderwijs en Vorming. Introduction Participants' expectations	
20.30	(Rest of evening free) [Meeting of the preparatory group]	

Monday November 24th

Ministère de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Boulevard Léopold II, 44, Bruxelles

From 8.45	<i>Meeting point Lobby of Boulevard Léopold II, 44</i> Welcome coffee	
9.15	Official Welcomes from hosts: Ministère de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles Vlaamse Overheid – Department Onderwijs en Vorming. Opening by António Silva Mendes, Director EAC Directorate B, Practical Information	Salle Wallonie-Bruxelles 6A 101
9.30	Brief introduction - ET 2020 - Peer learning / Peer review in ET 2020 (Paul Holdsworth, European Commission)	
9.50	Introduction to the topic: JD Carpentieri	
10.30	Policy Case 1 Belgium FR Myriam Schauwers and Michèle Minne	
10.50	Questions for clarification	
11.00	Coffee break	
11.20	Policy case 2 Portugal	

	Francisca Simões and Luis Alcoforado	
11.40	Questions for clarification	
11.50	Individual reflection	
12.00	Policy Case 3 The Netherlands Hans Hindriks, Arjan Beune and Ilona Kish	
12.20	Questions for clarification	
12.30	Practical issues around afternoon, groups	
13.00	Lunch hosted by Ministère de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles	
13.45	First session of group discussions ICF suggested framework, Key Success factor 6	Salle Wallonie- Bruxelles 6A 101 Salle André Franquin : 2B 176 Salle Eugène Ysaye : 0E 011
14.45	Follow-up of first session	Salle Eugène Ysaye : 0E 011
15.15	Second set of group discussion – What makes policy cohesion? Success factors	Salle Wallonie- Bruxelles 6A 101 Salle André Franquin : 2B 176 Salle Eugène Ysaye : 0E 011
16.00	Coffee break	
16.20	Follow up on discussions. Lessons learned. Message to take home. Refined list of success factors from Stuttgart?	Salle Wallonie- Bruxelles 6A 101
17.00	Reflections on the Day Preparation for tomorrow Feedback to WG	
18.00	Close of seminar	