

Key messages of the ET2020 Working Group on Adult Learning

Adult learning can improve lives and economies.

Adult learning benefits individuals, companies and society. Adults that continue to learn earn more, are more employable, enjoy better health and are more active citizens. Adult learning improves companies' innovation performance, productivity, profitability and workforce motivation. It helps to improve a country's economic competitiveness and growth.

The high number of adults with poor basic skills is a major challenge for society. Too few adults have access to adult learning. The EU is far from attaining its benchmark of 15% adult participation in learning by 2020.

A major boost is needed to raise adults' basic skills.

Basic skills include reading, writing, spoken language, numeracy and digital skills. Improvements in these skills can enhance individuals' employment opportunities and nations' economic competitiveness. Education in basic skills can reduce social inequality, increase inclusion, cohesion and active citizenship; and improve mental and physical health.

All EU Member States need to help many more adults to improve their competences in the basic skills they need in order to thrive in today's society.

Member States need proactive policies to improve opportunities and incentives for their citizens, and to facilitate the integration of adult migrants and refugees.

Better outreach and collaboration are needed to promote the participation of adults in learning, leading to their inclusion.

More effective, targeted outreach strategies at national, regional and adult learning providers' level can raise awareness of the basic skills gap and increase individuals' motivation to improve their skills.

Member States should provide high quality, well-targeted courses, and generate demand for formal, non-formal and informal basic skills training. This provision should be part of the service given to unemployed adults; training and upskilling are most effective when participation is voluntary.

Many adults are motivated to learn for employment, and workplace basic skills programmes produce benefits for employees and employers alike. Member States need to work closely with employers and unions to increase the number and scope of workplace basic skills programmes.

To improve national adult skills levels, high quality programmes are essential.

Adult basic skills education requires adult-specific teaching methods and high quality curricula that include authentic materials from all areas of everyday life.

Member States should develop initial, formative and summative assessment and self-assessment strategies that motivate adults and support their learning.

Teaching adult basic skills is a challenging job and requires specialised training. Member States need to provide adult basic skills educators with stable career pathways and appropriate employment conditions, as well as high quality initial training and ongoing professional development that focus on adult-specific teaching strategies as well as subject matter.

Adult learners with basic skills difficulties often need extra support to complete their learning journey, such as specialised guidance services, clear progression routes, and opportunities for the accreditation and certification of their prior learning. Effective support increases the likelihood that adults will take the next step up.

To encourage participation and persistence, programmes need to be offered as close as possible to where people live. Practical support on matters such as course fees, travel costs, childcare and time off work should also be provided. Programmes should offer the possibility to resume after a period away from learning.

All adults now need digital skills.

Adult learners do not just need better literacy, they also need better *digital* literacy. There is a growing 'digital divide' in Europe. Digital skills are basic skills. However, many adults lack the skills they need to live and work in an increasingly digital society and labour market. They are unable to benefit fully from the opportunities offered by digital media and risk being further excluded as ever more information and services are offered 'on-line'.

Digital resources need to be more extensively used in adult education.

ICTs can and should play a more important role in the acquisition of literacy. Mobile devices, open educational resources (OER) and social media have a great potential for widening access to adult learning. These can support adults' informal learning and improve formal and non-formal education opportunities. However, the potential of ICTs in adult learning is currently not fully realised. Learners should have the right to acquire for free digital basic skills. Outreach activities are needed to involve hard-to-reach groups. Programmes should be devised to incorporate ICTs in the development of adult literacy and numeracy.

The 'OER revolution' promises to make available high quality educational resources to anyone, anytime, anywhere and at a relatively low cost. However, a recent European Commission study¹ shows that this revolution has not hit home in the adult learning sector in many EU member states. If Member States rely only on incremental and market-driven progress to address this challenge, much of the ICT learning potential will remain unexplored, so large scale policy initiatives are needed to overcome the poor ICT infrastructure in the adult learning sector.

Policies should ensure a good balance between four elements:

- a clear vision for promoting adult digital skills and harnessing digital potential;
- ensuring the availability of high quality learning resources;

¹[Adult Learners in Digital Learning Environments \(EAC-2013-0563\)](#)

- comprehensive programmes to support adult educators in updating their skills and using ICT effectively; and
- innovative approaches to ensure adequate investment in infrastructure and hardware.

Adult learning provision needs to be coordinated and coherent.

A strategic, long-term focus on sustainable adult learning provision, with strong governance and a systemic approach to improving national basic skills, will benefit a broad range of policy areas. It will also provide significant return on investment in the form of decreased social spending and a richer, more dynamic economy. Short-term, low quality adult learning programmes are wasteful and ineffective.

Adult learning is a complex policy field. It makes important contributions to many other policies (e.g. economy, health, family ...). The responsibility for adult learning policy is often divided across several ministries and agencies (e.g. education, training, migration, justice ...) and several levels of policy making (municipal, regional, national). This shared responsibility often results in a situation where adult learning policy is fragmented and its efficiency suffers from insufficient coordination.

The provision of adult education is delivered by a wide range of government, private sector and third sector organisations. Therefore, the effectiveness of adult learning policy and provision as a whole is often undermined by the lack of coordination between these many parties, leading to fragmented and incoherent provision.

Improved basic skills will bring important benefits in many policy areas. Effective policies require strong collaboration between Education, Employment, Welfare, Business, and Health ministries, social partners and civil society. Cooperation across policy areas needs to be improved in all Member States. It is particularly vital for implementing effective outreach strategies to difficult-to-engage groups of adults.

Member States need to ensure that adult learning policies are coherent over time i.e. based upon a long-term strategic vision, yet flexible enough to respond to new challenges, such as the refugee crisis, and to adjust in the light of feedback from users and monitoring.

Adult learning policies need to be informed by evidence and proper monitoring.

The choice of adult learning policy reforms must be based upon solid evidence highlighting the most effective practices and interventions. By investing in research on what works, and by monitoring the impact of their policies, countries can make provision more effective and save money in the long-term. The ET2020 Working Group on Adult Learning has helped to develop a framework that can guide policymakers in their decisions on adult learning policies².

² See: 'An in-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe' study.