



Report

Basic skills in the workplace

Peer Learning Activity



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Prepared by: Simon Broek



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1. Context

The aim of PLA - by comparing and contrasting policies from three countries, to identify the essential conditions for success of policies promoting the acquisition of basic skills

The aim of the peer learning activity (PLA) was, by comparing and contrasting policies from three countries, to identify the essential conditions for success of policies promoting the acquisition of basic skills (literacy, numeracy, digital skills) in the workplace (WP).

The PLA built upon previous work in this field, notably the mapping of current national policies that promote basic skills learning in the workplace. This mapping was conducted by the ET2020 Working Group on Adult Learning in 2016. This mapping shows that specific policies and programmes on basic skills learning at the workplace are identified in 18 of the 32 countries included in the mapping exercise. Aspects that were considered by countries to be important for the successful implementation of specific policies and programmes on basic skills learning at the workplace included the following:

- raising awareness of the basic skills needs of employees, and of the need to develop the skills of the workforce;
- encouraging employer involvement and commitment;
- tailoring programmes to the needs of the employees, employers and sectors;
- ensuring that trainers are sensitive to the different workplace contexts and how that can affect the skills training provided;
- ensuring that employee participation in learning is on a voluntary basis.

The PLA was built on:

- *the mapping of current national policies*
- *outputs of previous WGs*

The PLA was also able to take advantage of the findings of the study commissioned by the previous working group (the 'In-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe'¹) which examined the evidence available about the effectiveness of adult learning policies in general. It noted that adult participation in learning is strongly linked to policies that:

¹ European Commission/ ICF (2015), An in-depth analysis of adult learning policies and their effectiveness in Europe



- provide work-related training, including motivating employers to train and develop their employees and motivating employees to take up opportunities to learn;
- encourage and enable access to learning by adults who currently undertake little or no learning;
- make available funded or part-funded learning opportunities; and
- focus investment on adults with a specific need (e.g. to re-skill or upskill).

The research also shows the following types of policy (inter alia) to be effective:

- increasing learners' **disposition** towards learning by raising awareness of learning benefits, engaging social partners in planning, promotion and recruitment of learners to learning and providing appropriate introductory learning experiences;
- increasing **employers' investment** in learning by providing funding to assist employers to upskill and retrain their workforce, and promoting the provision of work-based learning;
- improving equity of **access** to learning for all by funding learning for disadvantaged and difficult-to-engage groups, using intermediary organisations in outreach to difficult-to-engage groups, and embedding basic skills development;
- delivering learning that is **relevant** to employers and learners by understanding and identifying the needs and motivations of learners and the skills needs of employers, promoting innovation and flexibility in the delivery of learning, and quality control.



2. Work process and content of the PLA

Basic information about PLA

Within the context of the Education and Training 2020 programme and the European Agenda for adult learning, this peer learning activity (PLA) was organised as part of the programme of work of the Working Group on adult learning.

The PLA took place from 22 to 24 February 2016 in Manchester (UK) in The Manchester College, a training provider that facilitates basic skills training in the workplace in the Manchester area. In total there were 20 participants, from 11 countries, mostly from Ministries, but also representing agencies, employers, trade unions and other stakeholder groups.

First day – introduction to PLA and the topic

During the **first day**, the participants were introduced to how a PLA works and discussed different approaches to analysing policies. In addition, expectations and questions for policy analysis were gathered and synthesized.

Based upon their countries' interests, they identified the following initial set of questions to guide the analysis of the three policies presented and discussed during the second day.



Questions about the objective and scope of policies (incl. relevance):

- Which programmes/policies in BSL are relevant to company needs?
- How to identify skills deficits and target groups (at the level of the state or employer)?
- How can basic skills training be a vehicle for encouraging further engagement in LLL (certification and validation)?
- Different approaches for different target groups (e.g. approaches to get unemployed people back into the labour market)?
- How can we make informal learning in the WP relevant and working for specific target groups?

Questions about organizational arrangements:

- How to ensure that all stakeholders are engaged?
- What is the role and responsibility of each stakeholder?
- What is the role of the government in coordination?
- What is the position (role) of the learner (employee) in shaping policies and delivery?
- How to enhance the quality of the trainers (and trainers of trainers)?

Questions about financing BSL in the WP:

- What is the role of funding?
- What are cost-sharing models (between learners, companies and state) and how does that relate to engagement (including 'compensation' / or paying for working time)?
- How to avoid dead-weight

Questions about results and sustainability:

- How can results be measured?
 - What are the elements that make a policy sustainable?
-

Second day – analysing policies

During the **second day** policies from England, the Netherlands and Norway were presented and analysed by the PLA participants. For each, policy success factors were identified. The three policy examples can be summarised as follows:²

² The presentations can be found on Yammer:

England: https://www.yammer.com/et2020workinggroups/uploaded_files/83062861;

the Netherlands: https://www.yammer.com/et2020workinggroups/uploaded_files/83062865;

Norway: https://www.yammer.com/et2020workinggroups/uploaded_files/83062883



- **England:** The focus of the presentation was on providing an overview of post-16 literacy and numeracy policies in England. The approach is to increase attention to basic skills in schools but on the other hand to provide specific policies for adults by establishing an enabling environment for providers and others (such as trade unions) to engage with basic skills for adults. One element of establishing the enabling environment involves a statutory entitlement for adults to access learning and there is dedicated funding for providers to offer targeted programmes.
- **The Netherlands:** The focus of the presentation was on a recent and very specific initiative: the 'Language-agreements'. These agreements between the government and companies aim at improving employees' work skills and personal skills through tailored language training. The initiative is devised in a manner similar to a marketing strategy, whereby language training is aimed at solving problems the companies face (such as employees not understanding safety instructions, being less efficient in work, being less able to follow vocational training to encourage innovation at the workplace) Language training (not using the term 'basic skills') has a 'return on investment' for the companies. To convince employers and employees, 'argument-cards' have been produced containing evidenced benefits of improved language skills.
- **Norway:** The focus of the presentation was on the long-standing Skills Plus programme (former Basic Skills in Working Life Programme). The programme aims to support active citizenship; improve employability and increase participation in education. This is a well-funded programme (24 million Euro in 2016), well embedded in policy frameworks, and based on tripartite cooperation. An application for funding requires cooperation between a provider and a company (usually through the provider). The training needs to be based on employers' needs. Within the programme, competence profiles are developed on basic skills needs related to specific job-profiles.

By comparing the success factors identified for each policy, a first draft framework of policy preconditions and successful policy approaches was developed.



*Third day – additional input from
social partners*

During the **third day**, additional input was provided by social partners' representatives and, inspired by their input, the draft framework of basic skills learning in the WP was further discussed by the participants and several clarifications were made and missing elements and aspects were added, after which consensus was found on the form and content of the overarching framework.

As a final activity, PLA participants grouped by country to see what they could take home from the PLA to their specific national contexts as inspiration for policy development in basic skills learning in the workplace.

This concise report will not provide a presentation of the detailed discussions that took place, but presents the overarching results in chapter 3 indicating where the elements identified derived from.



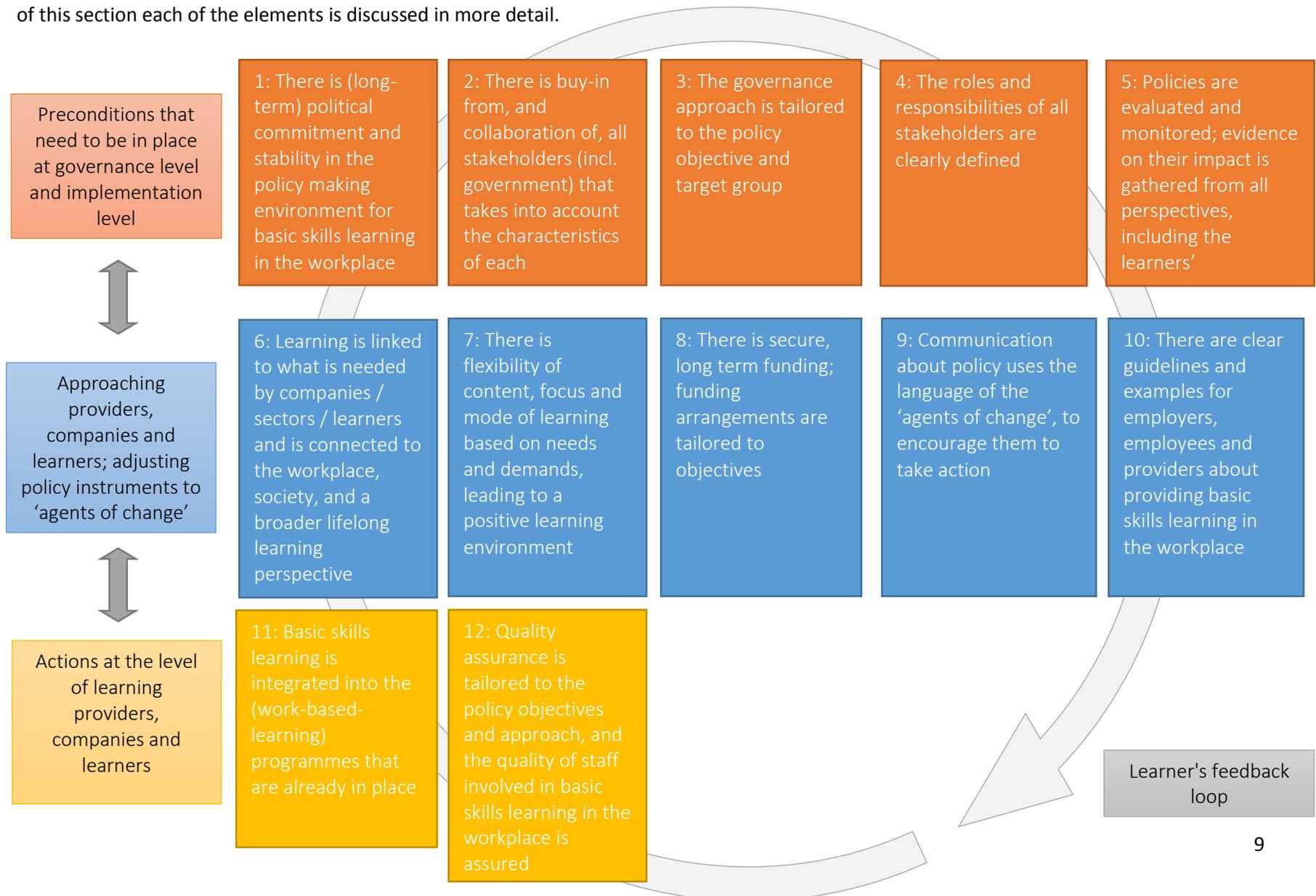
3. Key elements of successful policies promoting basic skills learning in the workplace

The elements were identified based on amalgamating the factors for success identified in relation to the three policy examples discussed during the PLA. In this it is important to keep in mind that these elements do not provide an exact 'blueprint' on what needs to happen in a country: that the country context plays an important role in situating the elements identified; for example countries with a more top-down tradition in policy making and implementation in the (adult) education area might emphasise different aspects compared to countries that have a more liberal and cooperative tradition in policy development and implementation.

The elements are divided into three sets. The first set concerns broad preconditions that need to be in place at governance level and implementation level to enable policies to be sustainable. The second set concerns elements that deal more with how those involved in the governance and cooperation can approach providers, companies and learners to stimulate basic skills learning in the workplace: how policy instruments should be adjusted to the specific character of the 'agents of change' (i.e. those that need to be stimulated to take action). The third set deals with what can be done at the level of the provider/company. These three sets of elements are clearly identified in the schematic overview presented below.



Below please find the schematic overview of the key elements for an effective policy promoting basic skills learning in the workplace. In the rest of this section each of the elements is discussed in more detail.





Preconditions that need to be in place at governance level

1: There is (long-term) political commitment and stability in the policy making environment for basic skills learning in the workplace

Description: This precondition points to the finding that to improve the situation regarding low levels of basic skills in society and in the workplace requires a long-term perspective and long-term commitment. However, the participants highlighted that in many countries the usual mode of dealing with this issue is to develop and implement narrowly time-bound projects (either financed through ESF) and that this is less effective as an approach.

Evidence from PLA: The policy example from Norway shows clearly a long-term commitment as the Skills Plus programme has been running already for over a decade (albeit under a different name), which has resulted in embedding the programme in different policies and assuring a funding base. In England, although there are changes in the governance (shifting responsibilities to lower levels), there is stability in the provision landscape. The statutory entitlement ensures that providers have literacy and numeracy as part of regular curriculum and there is a core of people involved.

2: There is buy-in from, and collaboration of, all stakeholders (incl. government) that takes into account the characteristics of each

Description: Basic skills learning in the workplace is associated with many different stakeholders and different policy areas. A precondition for an effective policy requires that all stakeholders be engaged in policy design, development and implementation. This relates as well to establishing collaboration between the stakeholders based on the identification of their specific characteristics. For instance, trade unions are often well positioned to engage with both learners (i.e. employees) and employers; employer associations could stimulate a more strategic orientation of companies (especially SMEs) on basic skills learning; and other intermediate bodies and agencies such as Chambers of commerce, sector organisations, Public Employment Services (PES) can each play a specific role in the design, development and implementation of policies. Finally, at government level, many different departments could be involved.

Evidence from PLA: The Norwegian example shows that the policy is based on a tripartite structure which results in the buy-in of all stakeholders. Applying for funding is a joint effort of a training provider and a company, ensuring that they collaborate and that the training responds to employers' needs. In the Netherlands, the language agreements are based on employers' needs and



demands: they decide themselves what kind of problems need to be solved by language training. The agreement ensures a commitment by the companies to focus on language skills. The language agreement is about convincing employers that it is in the interest of the company to invest in the language skills of their employees. As an additional instrument the government provides funding to support companies who invest in language at the workplace. In England, the trade union, via UnionLearn plays an important role in providing basic skills training in unionised workplaces (mostly in the public sector), in cooperation with employers.

3: The governance approach is tailored to the policy objective and target group

Description: The PLA found that there is no single policy blueprint to stimulate basic skills learning in the workplace and that there are different routes to increasing basic skills learning. Routes may go via the employers, via training providers, or via the employees (learners) directly. Each route demands its unique mix of policy instruments involving ‘sticks’ (such as legislation) and ‘carrots’ (such as subsidies). Other policy instruments can lie in soft measures such as communication strategies and marketing, or in more directive specific measures such as the inspection of training providers. The policy mix is very much dependent on the national context, the way responsibilities are divided between the main stakeholders and the role of the government in relation to this policy area.

Evidence from PLA: The example from England showed that an enabling condition is that basic skills acquisition is based on a statutory entitlement, providing for everyone the right to upgrade his/her basic skills levels. The Dutch example showed that the combination of subsidy and sophisticated communication / marketing strategy works in engaging with companies.

4: The roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders are clearly defined

Description: As already indicated, policies need to rely on the involvement and engagement of all stakeholders. This entails as well that their roles and responsibilities are clearly articulated. This does not only relate to the roles of ministries, employers and training providers, but also to intermediate bodies and agencies (such as trade unions, sector organisations, PES etc.) that can support the further development and implementation of the policies and reach the specific end-beneficiaries.



Evidence from PLA: the Dutch example clearly shows the benefit of defining roles and responsibilities, especially when it comes to the implementation of policies and the delivery of training programmes. Broadly, the government sets the frameworks but leaves the mode and approach to basic skills learning to be defined jointly between the employer and the training providers. The Learning-Working-Desks function as intermediary bodies, being in close contact with the companies and supporting them in engaging in language training. The English example shows that there are clearly defined roles when it comes to the delivery of programmes: this is up to the training providers. The trade unions' role is to engage directly with employers and employees to set up programmes in basic skills. In Norway, Skills Norway (i.e. the organisation operating the Skills Plus programme) has a facilitating function and supports training providers and companies in knowledge development and sharing. The training providers and companies have a joint responsibility when it comes to applying for funding and implementing the training.

5: Policies are evaluated and monitored; evidence on their impact is gathered from all perspectives, including the learners'

Description: The PLA participants highlighted the importance of sound research and analysis on policies. This not only for accountability reasons, but also for gathering evidence of what works and what does not. Furthermore, research evidence is important to showcase how basic skills learning can yield benefits for employers, learners and the broader society. Research should consider the perspectives of different stakeholders including the learners. Finally, learning from other countries is encouraged by the participants to improve the own policies.

Evidence from PLA: All three policy examples show the importance of research. The English example showed that research is essential in understanding what are the key problems (for instance that many people who have a formal qualification, lack basic skills, or that many who lack basic skills also have other non-learning needs). The Dutch example showed that research is used to develop 'argumentation-cards' to convince employers and employees to stimulate basic skills learning (more specifically language learning). Discussion of the Norwegian example highlighted a lack of data about the tangible learning outcomes achieved by the policy and a lack of monitoring data to feed into improvements in the approach.



6: Learning is linked to what is needed by companies / sectors / learners and is connected to the workplace, society, and a broader lifelong learning perspective

Description: During the PLA, much emphasis was placed on making the basic skills learning relevant to employers, society and the learners themselves. This requires that communication about basic skills learning be undertaken in the ‘language’ of the recipient (employer or learner); for example, this could mean communication with employers should not emphasise ‘basic skills’ as such, but should be phased in terms of ways to solve problems employers might face (e.g. language or communications problems lead to lower productivity, occurrence of errors, neglecting safety instructions leading to accidents at work etc.) The learning approach should also strike a balance between being directly linked to the working context (e.g. language learning through learning health and safety instructions) and setting learners on a lifelong learning pathway (whereby enrolling in a basic skills programme is followed-up by enrolling in other programmes, potentially leading to a formal qualification. It could also have a less formal outcome that participants acquire a renewed joy in learning). Importantly, to have lasting effects and behavioural change, the learning should not be a one-off event, but should lead naturally to further participation in learning afterwards.

Approaching providers, companies and learners; adjusting policy instruments to ‘agents of change’

Evidence from PLA: All policies discussed showcase the importance of tailoring basic skills learning to the specific work context. In Norway, specific basic skills curricula are developed in relation to specific job profiles. In the Netherlands, the tailoring is ensured by allowing the content, approach and mode of delivery to be decided between the employer and the training provider. In England as well, for instance in the apprenticeship system, the training providers together with the employers determine how English and Maths are integrated into the programme; (training in these skills is mandatory for learners who do not have the required level on entering the programme).

7: There is flexibility of content, focus and mode of learning based on needs and demands, leading to a positive learning environment

Description: The PLA pointed to the fact that basic skills learning is not self-evident, either for the employee or for the employer: employees need to be made aware how it would benefit them; employers might see basic skills learning as a responsibility of the government unless the benefits to them are pointed out. To engage the employees (i.e. the learners), it is therefore of the



highest importance to apply general adult learning principles to the outreach, content, approach, mode of learning and organisation of learning. This means that there is – in relation to the employees and the employers - no one-size-fits-all, but that the content, focus, mode of learning etc. are tailored to the needs and demands of the learners and the employers. This also entails a decision whether the learning should lead to obtaining (transversal) basic skills, or whether it should also lead to a qualification.

Evidence from PLA: The Dutch and Norwegian policy practice show that it is possible to put mechanisms in place to allow the training provided to be tailored to specific needs and demand. In the case of Norway, this was by having the training provider and employer apply for funding together taking into account the employers' needs; and in the case of the Netherlands, this was having the employers decide themselves what kind of language training is needed to solve their problem. In both cases, the training offer is demand-, rather than supply-, driven.

8: There is secure, long term funding; funding arrangements are tailored to objectives

Description: To ensure sustainability in basic skills policies and programmes, the PLA participants emphasised the need for stakeholder involvement, commitment and cooperation. Another important aspect however is funding. Funding and funding arrangements are instrumental to reaching policy objectives. There are two aspects here. The first is that there should be a certain amount of dedicated funding from national budgets to ensure continuity in policy engagement; the second aspect is that the funding arrangements vis-a-vis companies, training providers and learners should provide incentives to work in line with the policy objective. This means that thought needs to be given to co-funding arrangements in policies aimed at different actors: companies (e.g. what the percentage of co-funding?); training providers (e.g. should there be results-based subsidies?); and learners (e.g. should there be financial incentives such as small reimbursement upon completion of a course?; facilitating childcare etc.).

Evidence from PLA: The Norwegian case showcased the importance of secure funding arrangements to develop long-term policies. It however also showed that too easy funding availability can lead to inefficiency, or at least lack of interest in measuring the impact of policies and investment. The Dutch example showed how co-funding arrangements can ensure that companies



take (joint) responsibility for the learning of their employees. The English case showed how subsidies and funding arrangements for training providers (Further Education colleges) can incentivise them to integrate basic skills learning in their programmes.

9: Communication about policy uses the language of the ‘agents of change’, to encourage them to take action

Description: The PLA highlighted the importance of policymakers adopting a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to communicating with each target group. Speaking about ‘a lack of basic skills’ might not be stimulating for many learners, or their employers; a more positive approach, linked to solving immediate work-related and life-related challenges is a more convincing approach to stimulate learners to embark on a learning pathway and to stimulate employers to include basic skills learning in their human resources plan. Furthermore, it could help to focus programmes and the related communication strategy on one specific basic skill. ‘Improving language skills’ is more convincing than ‘improving a variety of basic skills including language, numeracy and digital skills’.

Evidence from PLA: The Dutch example showcases the benefits of using a ‘marketing approach’ to make employers aware of how they could benefit from investing in language learning. In England, the trade unions speak the language of employers and employees engaging them in basic skills training while avoiding stigmatisation.

10: There are clear guidelines and examples for employers, employees and providers about providing basic skills learning in the workplace

Description: Although the PLA acknowledged that employers, employees and training providers are well positioned to indicate what is needed in terms of learning content, approach and mode of delivery, additional guidelines and support in terms of providing good practices and testimonials for employers and learners can help to implement effective approaches to basic skills learning in the workplace.

Evidence from PLA: The Norwegian approach underlines that clear guidelines help training providers and employers to implement basic skills learning. In the Netherlands, the promotional material, including videos and testimonials have a positive impact on engaging other companies.



Actions at the level of learning providers, companies and learners

11: Basic skills learning is integrated into the (work-based-learning) programmes that are already in place

Description: Basic skills learning can take place in newly developed programmes and projects specifically addressing the target groups; however, basic skills learning in the workplace can also be further stimulated in the existing work-based learning programmes (for instance, apprenticeship programmes).

Evidence from PLA: The English policy framework clearly showed that firstly people who are somewhere 'in the system' (i.e. people who are enrolled in a programme leading to a formal qualification for instance an apprenticeship) can be targeted to oblige them to obtain the desired basic skills (English and maths). Actions are taken to increase the attention to basic skills learning in the apprenticeship system.

12: Quality assurance is tailored to the policy objectives and approach, and the quality of staff involved in basic skills learning in the workplace is assured

Description: Basic skills learning in the workplace is a challenging type of adult learning as it requires an understanding of basic skills learning and an understanding of each specific work context. This also impacts on the quality assurance arrangements and how they take into account different (tailored) approaches in relation to employers and employees' needs. It also relates to the competences of the staff involved in basic skills learning provision.

Evidence from PLA: The cases discussed do not provide as such the evidence to put this element as a factor for success, but the discussions on the policy examples do show that there are major concerns in assuring quality of the provision and the quality of staff. Issues being discussed concern qualifications for basic skills learning staff and continuous professional development arrangements.

The discussion of the three policy examples highlighted that a concern is how quality assurance can be tailored to the provision of basic skills training in the workplace and the quality of staff. Basic skills training in the workplace is challenging as it needs to be tailored to specific employers' and individuals' needs; it deals with skills deficits for which individuals are often ashamed; and finally, results are not always easily formalized or recognized (Basic skills



training requires progressing in small steps). This all puts pressure on the quality assurance and quality of staff.

Conclusions

It will be noted that several of the key factors for success identified during this PLA match those identified by other research, as outlined in section 1 above. The evidence of the PLA strengthens the idea that basic skills training at the workplace is a multi-faceted policy area for which a variety of different approaches need to be combined in order to be successful. What comes out clearly as the cornerstone of any policy in this area is that it should be based on a multi-stakeholder approach, in the design of policies, the implementation of policies, the funding of policies and delivery of basic skills training. This collaborative work can only thrive if there is a conducive policy making environment whereby all stakeholders commit to a long term objective. In order to assure this environment, all stakeholders need to be convinced by arguments which are put in their own language and respond to their needs (communication strategy).

*A multi-stakeholder approach in
the design of policies,
implementation of policies,
funding of policies and delivery of
basic skills training*



4. Implications

As can be seen, the PLA succeeded in identifying elements that are considered important in designing and implementing policies promoting basic skills learning in the workplace.

Some issues are too context-dependant to be identified except within a national or regional context. Examples are:

- what should be the division of responsibilities and roles between stakeholders?
- which policy mix works in relation to which specific objective in which context? and
- what kind of funding arrangements work in which context?

Furthermore, it can be noted that in particular some ‘how?’ questions, were not fully covered during the PLA, and some of the conclusions beg further questions; for example:

- How to establish the political commitment that is of such importance to policy success? and
- How to reach objectives that are shared by all stakeholders in order to ensure buy-in and collaboration?

Inevitably, in a short PLA, not all of the questions and expectations that participants brought with them could be addressed in detail. Perhaps the most important issues that remain to be addressed include: ways to identify skills deficits and to target provision effectively and efficiently; the position of the learner in shaping policy and provision, how to ensure the sustainability of policy and provision, and how to monitor the impact of provision.