

ADULT BASIC SKILLS TRAINING

This policy briefing focuses on adult basic skills training, which is a major challenge in the Western Balkans and Turkey. It addresses ministry and agency staff dealing with policy, as well as teachers and practitioners in adult learning.

The acquisition of knowledge and skills essential to modern life and work is a prerequisite for dynamic social and economic development. Individual citizens also need such knowledge and skills to lead a satisfying life. In most European Training Foundation (ETF) partner countries, the extent of the low skills problem among the adult population is widely underestimated and country-wide solutions are still largely absent.

However, Western Balkan countries and Turkey have begun to implement programmes to deal with this issue. They have learned a number of key lessons.

- Greater awareness is needed regarding the issue of adult basic skills training.
- Adults who engage in learning require incentives and extra support.
- Prior learning and experience must be recognised.
- Course materials and methods must be adapted more rigorously to the needs of adult learners.
- Improvements in basic skills must be linked with skills that help adults integrate or re-integrate into the labour market

RATIONALE

For a long time, education reforms in the region focused on education and training for young people. This was due to the demand for adapting curricula, teachers' skills and equipment to changed economic and social requirements. State support declined for the network of adult learning structures, which existed in the form of workers' universities, for example, or were closely linked to companies. These structures were closed or left to operate under market conditions. Training providers that occupied niche markets – such as information and communications technology (ICT), language and management training – and serviced a clientele who could afford it, were successful. Due to scarce government funding, the training of low-skilled and often jobless people was not a top priority. People who would have benefited most from training were deprived even further of a chance to improve their life and employment opportunities.

The problem of low skills is widespread. No studies assessing adult functional literacy or numeracy skills have yet been undertaken. However, based on years of school attendance, we know that 11.5% of people living in Turkey (2008) and between 1.0 and 2.4% of the population in the former Yugoslav countries are considered illiterate.

Nowadays, eight years or less of schooling are considered insufficient to

enable people to cope with complex challenges at work or in life in general. Results obtained by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 testify to a relatively poor performance by 15-year-old students in the region. The percentage of low performers in the various science, reading and maths tests range from 18 to 33% in Croatia, 24 to 42% in Turkey, 33 to 40% in Serbia, 50 to 58% in Montenegro and 56 to 67% in Albania¹. This means that the problem is likely to persist in the future.

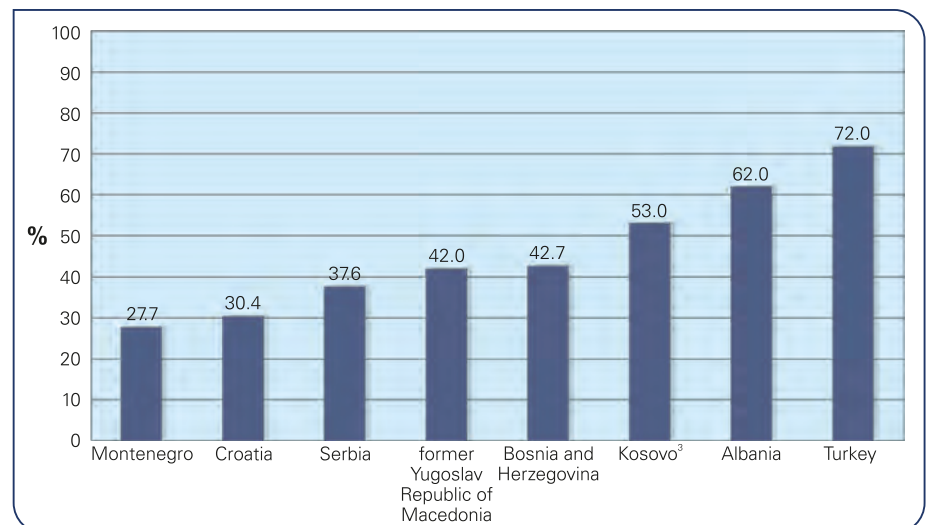
The situation causes problems for employment services, which find it difficult to match people on the register with existing vacancies (see INFORM 08



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on activation policies). It is also problematic for employers, who consider the lack of skilled staff a major obstacle that hinders business development and growth.

Citizens aged 15+ who have completed (at most) basic education² (%)



¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo did not participate in PISA 2009.

² Sources: Albania – ETF calculation based on Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2008 (weighted); Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia – LFS 2010; Kosovo – LFS 2009; the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Croatia and Turkey – reference population aged 15 to 74, Eurostat http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/employment_unemployment_lfs/data/database, accessed on 19 August 2011.

³ Under UNSCR 1244/1999, hereinafter 'Kosovo'.

INFORM



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In the last decade, thanks also to United Nations initiatives that promote literacy, education for all and adult learning, education ministries in the region have implemented new legal initiatives and launched programmes to stimulate adult learning. Adults generally enjoy the legal right to complete at least elementary education (eight or nine grades). However, programmes for adults are largely based on traditional approaches. Subjects, curricula and textbooks are often modelled on those for children, and teachers may lack specific adult education knowledge and skills. Adults are often required to sit through several years of elementary education to obtain a formal certificate, which in turn is a prerequisite for attending more vocationally oriented courses. This tends to lead to a poor uptake of such courses. It is also unclear whether traditional teaching and learning methods actually help to develop higher skill levels.

Mallows (2010), who reviewed several studies on the impact of basic skills training in the UK, found clear evidence that improved basic skills levels lead not only to increased wages and employability, but also have an impact on educational progress. Improved skills also result in additional benefits for society as a whole, such as better health, increased well-being and greater civic participation. This provides a strong argument for investing in adequate basic skills training.

The findings in this policy briefing are the outcome of three years' work with an ETF-led community of practice involving people from Western Balkan countries and Turkey. The community reviewed work undertaken in the area of basic skills training for adults. This work was conducted by the European Basic Skills Network, Portugal and Norway (countries with recent government-supported initiatives in this area) and the members' home countries. Examples of relevant initiatives undertaken in the region include the European Union (EU)-funded CARDS adult learning projects in Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) Second Chance project in Serbia, the Literacy for the 21st Century programme in Croatia and the Mothers and Daughters at School programme in Turkey ●

BASIC SKILLS PROGRAMMES

Montenegro considers basic education, English, ICT and entrepreneurship to be essential and is preparing relevant curricula. Basic skills training developed within the framework of the EU CARDS project in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia focused on literacy, numeracy, entrepreneurship, democracy and ICT. It was complemented with basic vocational skills training, where participants chose between food processing, hairdressing, electrical installations, bricklaying and embroidery. A successful basic skills project targeting adult Roma in Serbia introduced new courses, such as responsible living and basic work skills, which addressed areas including ICT, job hunting and self-employment. It also covered vocational skills for certain basic occupations. The project has been adapted and expanded to other low-skilled adults in Serbia.

DEFINITIONS

The concepts of (functional) literacy and basic skills have changed over the years. Instead of being associated with the completion of a certain number of school grades, the focus is on developing skills deemed to be essential for adults to cope with the everyday challenges of life, to become or remain active in the labour market and to participate actively in society. This is linked to the performance of basic tasks, such as filling in an employment form, understanding a basic legal agreement, following written instructions, reading newspapers and recognising traffic signs. These are competences⁴ rather than skills, and they are not always basic or functional. However, we refer to the commonly used terms of skills or basic skills for the purposes of this policy briefing.

Countries define the range of such skills differently, and some examples can be found below. The EU framework defines eight key competences (European Commission, 2007). In the conceptual framework that underpins its upcoming Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development considers literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments to be important basic skills and defines them in the following way.

- Literacy is understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential. (PIAAC Literacy Expert Group, 2009, p. 8)
- Numeracy is the ability to access, use, interpret and communicate mathematical information and ideas in order to engage in and manage the mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life. (PIAAC Numeracy Expert Group, 2009, p. 21)
- Problem solving in technology-rich environments involves using digital technology, communication tools and networks to acquire and evaluate information, communicate with others and perform practical tasks. (PIAAC Expert Group in Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments, 2009, p. 9)

⁴ Competences build on a 'combination of interrelated cognitive and practical skills, knowledge (including tacit knowledge), motivation, value orientation, attitudes, emotions and other social and behavioural components that together can be mobilised for effective action.' (OECD, 2002, pp. 8-9).

The Norwegian Framework for Basic Skills for Adults focuses on reading and writing, numeracy, digital competence and oral communication. The framework includes general level descriptors and competence goals to be reached at each of the three levels (with the highest – level 3 – being equal to 10th grade standards). Competence goals are reached when adults can master certain specified work or life situations. In addition, the framework comprises a number of guides and resources for teachers and examiners⁵. The teachers' handbook illustrates, for example, how the competence goals can guide the preparation and implementation of training courses. To guide adequate learning provision and the assessment of learning outcomes, international literacy and numeracy tests were reviewed and adapted to the Norwegian context. A test of digital competence was created. Teachers and trainers planning to use these tests must attend special courses in order to be recognised as certified examiners ●



photo: Purdue

MEASURES FOR EFFECTIVE ADULT BASIC SKILLS TRAINING

Requiring adults to go through several years of adapted elementary education programmes is costly and may not bring about the desired results in terms of developing people's essential work and life skills. A more promising avenue may be to focus on intensive basic skills programmes that include the ability to read, understand and communicate in (one of) the country's official language(s), deal with numbers and use modern information and communication tools in a variety of practical life and work situations. Such basic skills programmes could be combined with, or embedded in, vocational and business skills that would allow adults to earn a living. Good examples of such programmes exist on a pilot basis.

⁵ For all documents and resources, see: <http://www.vox.no/no/global-meny/English/Basic-skills/Framework/>

The same programme does not suit all adult learners. Based on entry tests, adults can be grouped into courses that correspond to their level of competence.

Training location is also important. Conducting the training in places other than primary schools can be beneficial, as can offering it in a variety of real-world learning arenas, such as on-site in companies or while walking through the city. Specialised non-governmental organisations (NGOs) familiar with specific target groups have years of experience in implementing donor projects and may be able to provide more effective training and support measures.

Motivating adults to attend training

A major challenge facing the training sector is that adults with lower skill levels tend to have little motivation to engage in training. For example, participation in Croatia's Literacy for the 21st Century programme has been low for many years. Adults are subject to conflicting pressures in everyday life and may not recognise or want to reveal that they lack certain skills. This suggests the need for various kinds of awareness-raising, incentives and support.

The EU-sponsored Second Chance and Integration of Minority Groups projects in Montenegro were well advertised in advance. Learners received small monthly allowances. Course completion also paved the way for participants to enter vocational training. This proved to be a strong motivation in a context in which courses taken outside the formal education system typically do not lead to a recognised certificate, which is required for further learning and when dealing with employment services and employers.

As part of its Mothers and Daughters at School initiative, Turkey made even greater efforts to attract adults to attend courses. Planning this major campaign, which aims to reach up to 3 million females, involved education authorities at all levels, other public institutions, NGOs and the private sector. A major Turkish bank helped by sponsoring TV spots, newspaper advertisements and posters. Provincial education directorates identified illiterate individuals and contacted them personally. The Prime Minister launched the campaign at a national event that attracted widespread media attention. Courses and materials are free and a means-tested scheme reimburses transport costs. The idea of

promoting family learning, the fact that learners could identify easily with course subjects, such as family planning, basic life skills, computers and child care, and the opportunity for second-level course graduates to attend a driving course acted as strong incentives.

With the help of the European Social Fund, Portugal set up a network of New Opportunities Centres all over the country. These centres act as one-stop shops for adults who wish to have their skills assessed and recognised and who want to continue learning. Staff at the centres conduct the initial skills assessment, help individuals to develop personal qualification plans and deliver courses on key competences. They also refer clients to appropriate training providers or to the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences system. The centres thus help adults to overcome the initial obstacles to further learning and/or skills recognition.

Adult teaching and learning strategies

Adults who do not have positive memories of their school days will benefit from a training approach that they perceive to be markedly different from their past experience. The use of authentic adult learning material and examples taken from everyday situations can help foster this perception.

Adults wish to demonstrate that they are capable and may be reluctant to reveal any inadequacies that they might have. It is necessary therefore to increase individuals' confidence and enhance their ability to learn. This can be done by working with realistic and achievable competence goals adapted to learners' skills and wishes and learning progress. A sense of achievement is important, especially during the early stages of the learning process. This can be mediated by constructively addressing learning problems and seeking solutions together (Svensrud et al., 2008). Showing respect to adult learners, valuing their experience and praising and building on their abilities is important.



photo: ITILO/M. Montesano

The shift to active learning techniques may pose a threat not only to learners, but also to teachers who are used to traditional ways of teaching. Teachers of adults require more intense training. They need to spend much more time preparing individual plans and lessons. They need to relinquish control and accept that pre-determined goals may not be achieved. Teachers and learners must agree on what and how something should be learned. They need to set targets and timescales for learning and monitor progress. Active learning involves the learner as a participant. It embraces a culture of learning from shared experiences with the teacher, from other participants or other life situations. Active learning is more likely to motivate learners. It can help all learners to learn, including those with learning difficulties.

In the projects involving adult Roma in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania, the use of trained assistants from the same community proved extremely beneficial in providing extra support and coaching to help solve learners' problems.

Financing adult basic skills programmes

Western Balkan countries and Turkey have already invested significant funding in adult training. However, given the need for adult training, the amount invested is marginal compared to the investment made in educating young people. Government funding could be supplemented with funding from the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance. Candidate countries for accession to the EU are in the process of formulating operational plans for human resources development. While the overall reform of the basic education system remains a challenge and requires greater resources, more extensive adult training can contribute to economic development and social cohesion, as illustrated before. Some countries, such as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, have successfully issued vouchers to co-finance training for small businesses. Cost-sharing with employers is also an important issue – in Norway, employers contribute to the cost of training by allowing staff time off work ■

CONCLUSIONS

In many ETF partner countries, insufficient attention is paid to the low levels of basic skills among adults. Such skills are essential for engaging in further learning, (re-)integrating into the labour market and fighting social deprivation and exclusion. Tailor-made programmes aimed at developing communication, maths, IT, vocational and business skills may prove more effective and efficient than requiring adults to attend courses modelled on subjects and curricula taken from the formal elementary education system. Awareness-raising, incentives and extra support are needed to attract adults to attend the courses and to persist with the learning journey. Adults are motivated to learn when the course builds on their prior experience, when they perceive related materials as meaningful for their daily lives or work, when they are treated with respect, when learning is practical and when they can make use of the new knowledge and skills. The latter includes the possibility of obtaining recognised certificates ■



photo: ITCLO/S. Bettini

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- BBC's online learning resources: www.bbc.co.uk/learning/
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Literacy and essential skills – tools and resources: www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/index.shtml
- Irish literacy tools: www.literacytools.ie/
- VOX (Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning), Framework for basic skills for adults, including descriptions of competence goals, methodological guides and tests: <http://www.vox.no/no/global-meny/English/Basic-skills/Framework/> ■

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