

# Professionalisation of adult basic skills teachers – issues and challenges across Europe

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## Introduction

This paper starts from two premises. Firstly that that adult basic skills are highly important in modern societies, in both economic and social terms, and secondly that this area of education provision is among the most challenging and skilled areas of teaching. It will argue for the importance of subject specific initial and continuing professional development as a key element of the policy structure needed for an effective basic skills teacher training system.

In developing this argument we will draw on discussions within a recently completed EU Learning Partnership. BASKET – Professional development of basic skills trainers<sup>11</sup> was funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission, under the Grundtvig learning partnership action. The project was implemented within the period 2011-2013 by a consortium of 8 partners from Europe: Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, Scotland, England<sup>12</sup>, Romania and the Czech Republic<sup>13</sup>, each at a different stage of development of systems to support improvements in the basic skills levels of their adult populations. The aim of the project was to explore national systems for the professional development of adult basic skills teachers. It also explored country specific challenges<sup>14</sup>.

**Keywords:** teachers, basic skills, professionalization, profession, continuous professional development

## The importance of adult basic skills

For the BASKET partners the term ‘adult basic skills’ encompasses the literacy, language and numeracy skills adults need to function in daily life. By literacy, is understood the ability to read and write; by language, the knowledge and understanding of the host country language; and by numeracy, the ability to understand and apply numerical concepts. For some BASKET partners digital skills, such as searching the internet, using email and simple office applications was also included.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://basket.vox.no/>

<sup>12</sup> Education is a devolved area in the United Kingdom meaning that Scotland and England have separate systems of education, including adult basic skills.

<sup>13</sup> [http://basket.vox.no/?page\\_id=146](http://basket.vox.no/?page_id=146)

<sup>14</sup> The BASKET partners are also members of the European Basic Skills Network (EBSN), a non-profit association gathering policy makers and policy providers engaged in basic skills training for adults. EBSN's vision is to make sure that all inhabitants of Europe have the level of basic skills they need to have access to lifelong learning, ensure their employability and be active citizens. EBSN advocates the importance of creating good models and systems for training basic skill teachers for adults. It promotes the development of models for delivery of the training as well as focusing on how to support and motivate teachers to attend such training.

The importance of basic skills development is emphasised at the highest level within Europe. The *EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy* (European Commission 2012) was set up to advise the European Commission on policy responses available to member states in the face of concern about literacy levels following the publication of the results from PISA, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, which found that one in five 15 year-olds in the European Union member states has 'insufficient reading skills' (European Commission 2012, 9).

The focus of the High Level Group's work was on literacy, specifically reading. However, it took a view of literacy as multi-dimensional, recognizing its links with areas such as language, numeracy, and digital and competences.

*Literacy is about people's ability to function in society as private individuals, active citizens, employees or parents. ... Literacy is about people's self-esteem, their interaction with others, their health and employability. Ultimately, literacy is about whether a society is fit for the future* (European Commission 2012: 11).

In November 2012, in response to the report of the High Level Group, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions on adult basic skills (European Council 2012). The Council acknowledged the crucial role of basic skills in empowering individual citizens and enabling them to play a full role in society. It called for a renewed European agenda for adult learning and broader learning provision for adults in the EU who lacked basic skills describing such provision as "*an effective way to combat the root causes of early school leaving, unemployment and limited participation in lifelong learning for the low-skilled*" (European Council 2012: 3). They noted also the negative impact of low basic skills levels on countries' ability to engender sustainable economic growth.

The recently published OECD Survey of Adult Skills (OECD: 2013) highlights the cost to individuals of poor basic skills:

*The median hourly wage of workers who can make complex inferences and evaluate subtle truth claims or arguments in written texts is more than 60% higher than for workers who can, at best, read relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information* (OECD: 2013, 3).

The OECD takes a broad approach to what it calls "key information-processing competencies" rather than basic skills. The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) assesses the proficiency of adults from age 16 onwards in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments. It also emphasises that those skills are relevant to adults in many social contexts and work situations, and are necessary for fully integrating and participating in the labour market, education and training, and social and civic life.

The demands of society are dynamic, requiring the improvement of skills - whether "basic skills" or "essential skills" or "key information-processing competencies" - throughout the entire life of an individual. What these skills encompass has extended over the last 20 years due to changes in the nature of work, the economy, information technology, educational expectations and society more generally. The EU High Level Group report (EC: 2012, 26)

recognises that, due to technological progress, adults face greater demands on their literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace and also for effective social and civic participation.

The international report of the recent OECD Survey of Adult Skills (OECD: 2013, 46) stresses the enormous changes that have taken place in recent times and the impact of those changes on the demands made on citizens. The report suggests a number of factors that have contributed to the growth in the importance of adult basic skills, among them the fact that access to computers and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) is widespread and growing and that such ICTs are changing how services are provided and consumed, requiring citizens to engage with more and more complex textual information than before. The report also stresses that employment in services and high-skilled occupations is growing, adding significantly to the basic skills demands on employees:

*It is no exaggeration to use the word “revolution” when talking about how our lives have changed over the past few decades. Today we rely on information and communication technologies and devices that hadn’t even been imagined in 1980. The way we live and work has changed profoundly – and so has the set of skills we need to participate fully in and benefit from our hyper-connected societies and increasingly knowledge-based economies (OECD 2013:3).*

The risks of the social and economic exclusion of a significant proportion of adults are clear, with negative consequences for individuals and society. As literacy, numeracy and digital skills become more important and relevant than ever before it is vital for the health of our economy and society that EU citizens are supported in improving their basic skills.

### **Teaching adult basic skills**

The difference good teaching makes to the strength of a national education system has been recognised. An influential 2010 analysis of the world’s best school systems concluded that “*the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers*” (Mourshed et al: 2010, 16). The report authors went on to state that of all the controllable factors in an education system the most important by far is the quality of teaching and that this is heavily influenced by the selection and training of teachers. In this, the adult basic skills system is no exception. In fact, we would argue that such is the complexity of the task faced by the adult basic skills teacher that their initial and ongoing training are of fundamental significance for the success of countries in addressing the basic skills needs in their populations.

It is clear then that addressing low levels of adult basic skills is vital for the health of our society and that teachers of adult basic skills have a particularly important role to play. However, this role is far from straightforward. There is a tendency to assume that teaching basic skills is a simple task. Actually, it is one of the most challenging and skilled areas of teaching. Adult basic skills teachers are often confronted with learners for whom traditional or

simple methods of learning to read or write or use numbers have not worked. This negative prior experience of education, or, equally, a lack of familiarity with formal education (for those who missed out on much of their schooling for a variety of reasons), plus the experience of coping with adult life without such important skills, means that a deep level of teacher knowledge and expertise are required.

If we want adults to improve their skills through formal and non-formal education initiatives then we need to recognise that teachers require opportunities for initial and continuing professional development to equip them with the skills and understanding necessary to support the needs of adults with low levels of basic skills.

Teaching adults is different from teaching children. Teachers of adult basic skills need an understanding of adult pedagogy, as do teachers of other subjects working with adults. Knowles, (REF) an American Adult Educator who popularised the theory of andragogy, observed that adults learn best when: (1) they understand why something is important to know or do; (2) they have the freedom to learn in their own way; (3) learning is experiential; (4) the time is right for them to learn; (5) and the process is positive and encouraging. These are important general principles and can be equally applied to adult basic skills learners. However, prospective teachers of adult basic skills have more to learn than other teachers of adults. The former do not start with recognised background knowledge of their subject in the same way as vocational teachers or other teachers of adults do. Teachers of adult basic skills do not bring an identifiable professional or vocational identity to their training course with them. For someone a vocational teaching health and beauty course, this identity might be as a hairdresser drawing on recent salon experience. Such a teacher has a dual identity as a hairdresser and as a teacher, whereas a teacher of adult basic skills has no directly-related vocational or professional field to fall back on. Teachers of adult basic skills did not gain as adults the skills they are required to teach and reflection on the nature of adult basic skills has an important role to play in preparing new teachers.

Basic skills learners need highly skilled professional to help them succeed and not re-experience earlier negative experiences (Tett, 2014). Those working in adult basic skills have to understand the context of the adult learner, recognise learners' knowledge and experience and build on learners' strengths in order to create an effective learning process. Teachers must have the skills to engage, motivate and empower learners to enable them to reach their goals in their private, family, community and working lives. Adult basic skills learners may have specific learning difficulties or be difficult to reach, due to the multiple barriers to participation in training and the labour market they face. Again this requires specific competences for practitioners to motivate and stimulate adults to learn, to increase their self-esteem, and eventually encourage them to progress towards other forms of learning.

The EU High Level Report on Literacy states that, "...*high-quality teachers and teaching lead to better learning outcomes, including literacy performance*" (EC: 2012, 44). This was recognized by the adult basic skills learners who took part in the European Commission funded *EUR-Alpha – European Network for Adult Literacy and Numeracy* –

*project that took place between 2009 and 2012.* In their Learner Manifesto<sup>15</sup> they called on EU governments to ensure that basic skills learners had access to 'specially trained teachers'.

In this paper we address the need for the professionalisation of adult basic skills teachers. We cannot make the assumption that we already have a "profession" for basic skills teachers across Europe (Nuissl, 2008). Indeed, the role of the adult basic skills teacher is under-valued in many EU member states. There is a lack of established systems for the training of adult basic skills teachers, with no established professional development pathways in many member states, and no formal qualification requirements for those teaching adult basic skills. Moreover, there is no common European frameworks or standards for professional development. There are also differences between countries in how they approach continuing professional development (CPD).

### **Training adult basic skills teachers**

In 2006 the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC), at the Institute of Education, London carried out a review of international literature on basic skills teacher education covering work on all types of professional development relevant to the needs of teachers of adult literacy, numeracy and language: primarily initial teacher education programmes, but also continuing professional development (Morton et al 2006). The review makes a number of suggestions for the design of teacher education programmes for basic skills teachers.

Such programmes should start by providing opportunities for teachers to explore their own beliefs and values relating to what and how they teach in the context of teaching adult literacy, language or numeracy. There can be conflict between the knowledge base as espoused on the course and participants' own practices and beliefs, which are often derived from their prior experiences as learners. Such beliefs should be acknowledged and challenged to avoid unconscious replication of school-based practice.

Trainee teachers are also adult learners and so teacher education programmes should be based on what is known about how adults learn, both in terms of the pedagogies that participants will use with their own learners, and in terms of their own lifelong learning as adult educators.

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Teachers of basic skills need rich, flexible networks of subject matter knowledge, but we should not assume that raising the level of subject matter in syllabuses on its own will have a direct effect on practice; subject matter knowledge alone is of little use without the knowledge of how to teach it.

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.eur-alpha.eu/IMG/pdf/manifesto\\_ukbat2.pdf](http://www.eur-alpha.eu/IMG/pdf/manifesto_ukbat2.pdf)

Best practice in basic skills teacher education is to avoid an “application of scientific knowledge” approach and instead to support trainee teachers in integrating the theoretical and practical ideas they are confronted with.

Basic skills teachers need to develop competence in teaching in less formal arenas than a traditional classroom. They need, for example, to operate in workplaces or in prisons or in community contexts and may need to experience this as part of their initial teacher education. However, there is no guarantee that what works in one context – e.g. a small community group with older adults – will transfer effectively to another context – e.g. a young offenders’ institute. Thus, teachers need access to conceptual frameworks which allow them to articulate their own perspectives on learning and teaching, and to reflect critically on the wider institutional, policy, social and cultural issues that enable or constrain their practice.

Teachers should be taught as they are expected to teach by taking part in practical professional development activities, which not only support their acquisition of relevant subject matter knowledge, but help them to “see” the subject from their learners’ point of view. Above all education programmes for adult basic skills teachers should be designed with an understanding that gaining expertise in teaching is a process with various stages. Teacher learning should be seen as career-long, and licensing of newly qualified teachers should ensure an extended period of structured education and development following initial training.

### **Competences for teachers of adult basic skills**

There is a lack of agreed competence profiles for teachers of adult basic skills at the European and national level (see Lattke 2008, p. 160f), but there have been a number of recent and notable attempts at the EU level to specify the competences required.

Firstly, the partnership behind the EU Grundtvig project “*TRAIN – Professionalization of Literacy and Basic Education – Basic Modules for Teacher Training (2006-2008)*” carried out explorative research to obtain more information about actual skills and the competence needs of those working in the field in the participating countries (Cyprus, France, Germany, Ireland, Slovenia and Switzerland). A questionnaire “*Profile of competencies in the field of literacy and basic education*”<sup>16</sup> was developed and sent out to researchers, trainers and managers working in the field of basic skills.

The resulting TRAIN framework specifies five competence categories:

Competence categories	
1. <i>skills and abilities</i>	The ability to recognise blockages and learning difficulties and to reflect on these with learners.

<sup>16</sup>See: [http://www.die-bonn.de/train/english/materials/questionnaire\\_english.PDF](http://www.die-bonn.de/train/english/materials/questionnaire_english.PDF)

	The ability to teach with person-centred methods
2. <i>professional competence</i>	knowledge and experience in adult education in general and in the field of basic skills as well.  The need to deal with heterogeneous learner groups
3. <i>Methodical expertise</i>	knowledge of different approaches and methods of basic skills acquisition  knowledge and abilities regarding learning styles, person-centred approaches, self-directed learning and use of ICT
4. <i>soft skills</i>	The ability to establish an environment for learning based on respect, appreciation and partnership
5. <i>personal competence</i>	The ability to reflect on and change personal moral concepts as well as attitudes regarding teaching and learning

*Alfarådet, The Nordic Adult Literacy Network. Description of Teachers' Competence in initial and functional literacy for adults with non-Nordic mother tongues" (2013), drew up a description of the competences required for the teaching of basic skills by defining six different competence areas. Each area is sub-divided into knowledge and skills and actions with very detailed advice and directions:*

1. Literacy in a global, local and individual perspective. Theoretical and didactic aspects and approaches. The teacher applies, and converts into didactic practice, various scientific theories of literacy – drawing on research - in their daily teaching work and is aware of how the individual's and society's values and attitudes to literacy affect both, policy planning as well as teaching, but also the participants' daily lives.
2. Adult formal learning in a creative and critical learning environment based on teachers' reflective practice and learners' learning goals. In interacting with the learners the teacher refers to their background, daily lives and goals. The teacher adapts content, didactics, and methods in order to suit the learners' level and creates a supportive and creative adult learning environment while constantly reflecting on own teaching practices.
3. Materials for adult learning multimodal, up-to-date and challenging. The teacher is capable to analyse, choose and utilise adequate teaching and learning materials according to the learners' needs for current and further situations.

4. Teaching oral communicative competence without written support to adult second-language learners. In cooperation with the learners, the teacher develops their oral communicative competence by referring to their resources, cultural background and communicative needs.
5. Initial and functional literacy for adult second-language learners. The teacher has theoretical, didactical and methodical knowledge concerning reading and writing skills and converts that knowledge into an adult-oriented, challenging and communication-based learning environment.
6. Basic Everyday Mathematics (Numeracy) for Adult Second-Language Learners. The teacher uses the learners' practical experience of mathematical situations as a basis for the development of communication-based mathematical skills adapted to the learners' individual everyday needs.

### **Developing basic skills teacher education**

The BASKET Learning Partnership produced a set of recommendations for developing professional adult basic skills teachers in Europe that go beyond the specific content of basic skills teacher training programmes to look at the place of these programmes within wider national education systems. The recommendations, aimed at decision makers, researchers and other stakeholders in adult basic skills, are informed by the work of the TRAIN and EURALPHA projects as well as previous research in this area.

### **Initial and continuing professional development for basic skills teachers**

BASKET recommendations:

Teachers of basic skills for adults should undertake initial professional development with a focus on three main aspects of the role: 1) teaching adult learners; 2) subject-specific knowledge and understanding; and 3) developing expertise in the teaching methodology of the specific subject.

However, even in member states where initial teacher training exists and offers a quality baseline, it needs to be enhanced and developed through regular continuing professional development (CPD), which supports practitioners in updating their theoretical and practical knowledge and understanding. Unfortunately, there are currently very few opportunities for basic skills teachers to engage in CPD. Professional development needs to be valued and teachers provided with space, time and, where possible, funding to undertake qualifications and training.

Models for delivery of CPD should be as flexible and accessible as possible. A variety of formats need to be considered for delivering CPD to fit into busy people's lives and help to motivate them so that good teachers are not lost. ICT and blended learning make it possible for teachers to access training at a time and place that are suitable for them. Module-based training enables teachers to learn more about a particular subject that is of interest to them and helps their professional development. Flexible pathways through CPD with prior recognition of learning should be



developed to facilitate the movement of some existing schoolteachers and teachers of other subjects to adults into the adult basic skills workforce.

### **Effecting change: building the infrastructure to support the development of adult basic skills**

The BASKET partners recommend that countries should include adult basic skills as a permanent part of their national education system, rather than as a short-term solution to solve a temporary problem. In some countries the infrastructure for developing a workforce of basic skills teachers is at the formative stage. Awareness raising about the ever shifting uses of literacy, language and numeracy in modern societies is an important initial and underpinning stage in the development of a coherent national policy for basic skills. In advocacy work with policy makers, use should be made of available national and international data on the impact of poor basic skills as well as individual case studies focusing on the individual, family and societal impact of low basic skills.

*As the 3201st European Council Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting: Council conclusions on literacy pointed out:*

*Monitoring skills levels in the adult population and engaging businesses, media, NGOs, social partners, cultural institutions, as well as social, employment and health services at local level, should form the basis for strategies aimed at increasing awareness of literacy problems in society as a whole. (European Council 2012)*

Basic skills development should be included as a specific area within the national strategy for Lifelong Learning. The EU Commission criteria for *National Strategy Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion* should include useful reference to basic skills levels in the adult population and steps being taken to address low levels of basic skills.

Awareness-raising should also take place with individual citizens emphasizing the impact of improving basic skills on their life chances and encouraging them to take responsibility for the development of their skills.

### ***Standards, Frameworks and Funding***

There are currently no common European qualification frameworks or standards for the professional development of teachers in the field of adult basic education. There are national systems of standards in some countries (give good practice examples), but for member states wishing to create systems where nothing is in place, a European reference point would be very helpful.

Access to funding to engage in teacher education and continuing professional development is reported by many as a major barrier to improving the quality and effectiveness of the basic skills teaching workforce.

### ***Wider European support***

Poor basic skills is not just a national problem, it is a shared European issue that all member states need to address. The size and the make up of the low-skilled group in each country may differ, but there are many people in

each country who would benefit from improving their literacy, language and / or numeracy. However, countries are at different stages of development in terms of addressing these concerns. The expertise and experience built up in certain EU countries should be shared with those who are at an earlier stage of development. There is a need to make such knowledge accessible to others and available for transfer. Sustained mechanisms should be developed that provide countries with access to expertise and experience built up in other countries: frameworks, advocacy strategies, structures, content etc. The EC should facilitate the transfer of effective policy initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

The demands of society are dynamic and the range of essential basic skills has extended over the last 20 years, largely due to technological progress, requiring us all to improve our skills as we progress through life. And yet basic skills teachers are often undervalued. It is easy to assume that teaching basic skills is a straightforward task. Many people believe that as the skills they teach are “basic” that it must also be “basic” to teach them. In fact adult literacy, language and numeracy are complex capabilities and teachers who support adults in trying to improve their basic skills require high levels of empathy, knowledge and skills in order to perform well.

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