

POSITION PAPER

Beyond the low-skills trap: a joint policy recommendation for adult learning in Europe

A Joint Position by EBSN & EAEA

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Executive Summary

In response to the 2024 OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) and stagnating participation rates, the European Basic Skills Network (EBSN) and the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) present this position paper. We argue that the "low-skills trap" is not a failure of learner motivation, but a structural failure of **Relevance, Access, and Governance**. This paper calls for a shift from short-term project funding to sustainable legal frameworks that validate skills, professionalise the workforce, and bring learning into the community.

1. The context: the high cost of stagnation

The latest PIAAC data (2023/2024) reveals a sobering reality: participation in adult learning has stagnated or declined in many OECD countries. While rising tide statistics show some growth, the gap between the "educationally rich" and "poor" is widening.

The Cost of Inaction:

We cannot afford to view this merely as a statistic. As the University of Hamburg (Germany) argues, we are paying the price today for the investments we failed to make yesterday. Had we invested robustly in civic and green education in the 1980s, our current resilience to climate change and polarisation would be vastly different. Saving money on adult education today guarantees a much higher social and economic bill tomorrow.

Policy Position: To break this cycle, we must reform three structural pillars: **Relevance, Access, and Governance**.

2. Pillar I: Relevance – from "deficit" to "resource"

The traditional "deficit model"—telling adults what they lack—is a barrier. To engage the workforce of 2035, learning must be immediately applicable to their lives and a source of constant development and adaptation.

Strategic Recommendations:

1. **Contextualised learning:** Training must solve immediate life problems (e.g., digital banking, health) rather than following abstract school curricula.
2. **Co-creation:** Learners must be partners in designing their education. We endorse models like **La Verneda-Sant Martí**, where learners govern the institution, ensuring the offer meets real needs.

3. **Life skills approach:** We advocate for the *Life Skills for Europe* framework, broadening the focus from narrow employability to capabilities for health and civic engagement.

Evidence in Action:

- **NoCode Institute (Portugal):** Demonstrates that "motivation" emerges naturally when training is linked to real-world projects.

3. Pillar II: Access & Pathways – de-schooling the system

"Lack of time" is the most cited barrier, but the *setting* of learning is equally critical. For many adults with negative prior experiences, walking back into a "school" is impossible.

Strategic Recommendations:

1. **De-schooling learning spaces:** As noted by **NALA (Ireland)**, school-like environments trigger anxiety for many basic skills learners. We must shift delivery to **Community learning centres (CLCs)**, libraries, and low-threshold hubs, while simultaneously providing a range of flexible, accessible **online and blended learning options**.
2. **Recognition & Validation:** Motivation increases when skills are visible. We need flexible **Validation of Prior Learning (VPL)** systems that recognise non-formal skills, allowing learners to build "micro-credentials" toward larger qualifications.
3. **The right to time:** We call for legal entitlements to **Educational Leave** (e.g., 5 days/year) to protect time for learning, particularly for shift workers.

Evidence in Action:

- **'Lernstuben' (Switzerland) & Dutch Libraries:** These "living room" style community spaces offer low-threshold access where citizens can drop in for help without enrolling in a formal "course."
- **Kapos Badges (Finland):** A best practice in validation where basic skills are recognised through digital open badges, creating a flexible, visible pathway for learners to prove their competence.
- **Learn with NALA (Ireland):** Proves that online and blended learning formats can be highly successful for basic skills in practice, offering learners the autonomy and flexibility they need outside of formal classrooms.

4. Pillar III: Governance – stability and professionalisation

A system is only as good as its teachers. Currently, the sector suffers from "projectification" and precarious work.

Strategic recommendations:

1. **Professionalisation of the workforce:** We cannot rely on volunteers or short-term contracts for critical social infrastructure. We demand defined **career pathways**,

possibilities for progression, and salary scales that reward the specialised expertise of adult educators.

2. **Legal certainty:** Adult Education must be funded with the same stability as the formal school system—secured by law and managed by a central body (e.g., National Adult Learning Councils) to prevent fragmentation.
3. **Systemic investment:** Moving beyond pilot projects to sustainable financing that allows providers to plan for the long term.

Evidence in Action:

- **Qualifica Programme (Portugal):** An integrated governance model that successfully articulates adult qualifications through a network of centres.
- **University of Hamburg (Germany):** Highlights that professionalisation prevents the "brain drain" of expertise from the sector.

5. Emerging priorities: democracy, inclusion, and ageing

- **AI & democratic literacy:** Basic skills now include navigating AI, media, and digital participation and voting systems.
- **The ageing society:** "Lifelong Learning" must not expire at retirement. Strategies must explicitly support older adults to combat isolation.
- **Learning Cities:** We endorse the UNESCO "Learning Cities" approach to address urbanisation and health holistically.

6. Conclusion: The time to invest is NOW!

The answer to low skills is not to blame the individual for "lack of motivation." It is to build a system that is **relevant** (co-created), **accessible** (in community spaces, not schools), and **professionally led**.

As the historical data warns us, the cost of repairing social exclusion tomorrow is far higher than the cost of preventing it today. **EBSN and EAEA call on European governments to enact these structural reforms immediately.**

Annex: Summary of best practices, projects and resources submitted by member organisations attached as a separate document