

Review of National Strategies for Adult Basic Skills

Report and case studies

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July 2022

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Published by National Learning and Work Institute
4th Floor Arnhem House, 31 Waterloo Way, Leicester LE1 6LP
Company registration no. 2603322 | Charity registration no. 1002775

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1. Introduction

Background and aims

This report presents the findings of a short international review of adult basic skills strategies. The work was undertaken by Learning & Work Institute (L&W) as part of its working leading the Skills for Life Alliance, a cross-sector expert group working to drive adult essential skills up the national policy agenda¹. Formed in 2021, the Alliance was co-convened by L&W and Hoxby in response to a stark decline in the numbers of adults taking part in literacy and numeracy learning, alongside evidence of the continuing high levels of basic skills needs in the adult population. The Alliance seeks to explore current drivers of participation and to identify changes to policy and practice that could make a difference.

The international review was commissioned to support the Alliance in developing a better understanding of adult basic skills policy in countries broadly comparable to England in terms of their levels of economic, social and political development. By reviewing other national basic skills strategies, the research aimed to shed light on ways in which there may be scope to strengthen and develop adult basic skills policy in England. The study aimed to:

- Identify comparator countries with a current national strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and / or digital skills. Where policy is devolved, this could include a regional strategy.
- Develop a comparative summary of key features of national literacy / basic skills policies and strategies.
- Develop four concise case studies of adult basic skills policies and strategies in different settings.

Our approach

The research consisted of the following stages:

- **Scoping and longlisting.** We scoped out the features of national policy to be investigated through the research and developed a longlist of potential case studies. We carried out scoping interviews with key stakeholders and undertook a desk based rapid review of evidence from policy, programmes and research. This enabled us to develop a grid summarising nine national strategies (see Appendix) and to identify findings from existing research that shed light on the issues of concern to the project.
- **Shortlisting.** We selected four countries from those included in the summary grid to develop as case studies: Australia, Germany, Norway and Switzerland. Case

¹ <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/skills-for-life-alliance/>

studies were identified through the scoping as countries where there is a distinct strategic focus on adult basic skills, and our selection aimed to include a range of examples of strategic approaches to policy development and implementation. It was also influenced by our perception that we would be able to access adequate evidence within the project's timescales. Drawing on L&W's international network of contacts, we arranged to carry out semi-structured interviews with key informants in policy-focused roles in each of these countries.

- **Case study development.** We carried out semi-structured video interviews with key case study contacts. Interviews were conducted in English and questions were circulated in advance. Additional material to support case study development was identified through the interviews and via searches of relevant websites. Where possible, we accessed material in English, and also used Google Translate.
- **Reporting.** This report consists of: a summary of key findings from the research that illuminate issues around adult basic skills policy in England; the four national case studies, and the longlist grid summarising key features of national basic skills strategies.

The current adult basic skills policy context in England

Adult basic skills policy in England covers English literacy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), maths (numeracy) and digital skills and is set out in the national skills strategy, *Skills for Jobs*,² and the Education and Skills Funding Agency's (ESFA) *Funding Rules*.³ It includes an entitlement to fully funded learning via the Adult Education Budget (AEB) for the following qualifications:

- English and maths, up to and including level 2, for individuals aged 19 and over, who have not previously attained a GCSE grade 4 (C), or higher
- Essential Digital Skills up to and including level 1, for individuals aged 19 and over, who have digital skills assessed at below level 1.

These national entitlements apply in local areas both with and without devolved AEB. In non-devolution areas, adults with ESOL needs can access fully-funded provision if they are unemployed or on a low income and aged 19 to 23, and co-funded learning in other cases. Locally determined arrangements for ESOL apply in AEB devolution areas.

The policy focus on adult basic skills was introduced with the *Skills for Life* strategy for literacy, language and numeracy in 2001, and the digital skills entitlement was added in 2020. Evidence indicates that there are high levels of basic skills needs across literacy, numeracy, ESOL and digital skills in England. An estimated nine million working-age

²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957810/Skills_for_jobs_lifelong_learning_for_opportunity_and_growth_print_version.pdf

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1062537/AEB_2021_to_2022_version_3_finalGOV_23March_CLEARED.pdf

adults have low basic skills in literacy or numeracy, of whom five million have low skills in both. It is estimated that 11.7 million people do not have the digital 'life' skills required to participate in the digital world. England ranks 15th out of 31 OECD countries for literacy skills and 19th for numeracy skills.⁴

Despite these high levels of need, since 2010 cuts have been made across the board to government funding for adult basic skills. The value of AEB fell by over 50 per cent in real terms from 2011-12 to 2019-20, while funding rates per learner were frozen and funding for referral organisations was also cut.⁵ In this context of reduced resourcing, adult participation in English, maths and ESOL plummeted by 63, 62 and 17 per cent respectively since 2012. Participation has fallen across every Mayoral Combined Authority in England.

In 2022, the government launched Multiply, a 3-year £560m programme funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Multiply aims to boost adult numeracy skills, supporting individual life chances and business productivity, through locally delivered numeracy interventions and a new national online learning platform. Multiply provision is expected to be complementary to and different from existing adult numeracy provision offered through the AEB.

⁴ L&W (2021) *Getting the Basics Right: the case for action on adult basic skills*
<https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/getting-the-basics-right-the-case-for-action-on-adult-basic-skills/>

⁵ L&W, *Getting the Basics Right*.

2. Summary findings from the research

As an earlier international comparative study of basic skills policy observed, differences in national systems in terms of policy, delivery, and funding levels tend to limit the direct comparisons that can be made between countries.⁶ Nevertheless, evidence from our case study research and evidence review suggests a number of key areas where international comparisons can illuminate ways in which basic skills policy in England could be strengthened to drive up participation. They are:

- Policy implementation
- Systems based approach
- Skills policy devolution
- Language provision for migrants
- Support for delivery organisations
- Basic skills delivery models

Policy implementation

Basic skills provision in England is often cited as an international exemplar. This has been noted in previous research and was borne out by comments from some case study interviewees.⁷ However, it is also clear that this reputation rests largely on the historic example of *Skills for Life*. As L&W's recent briefing paper noted, the current policy context is very different from that of twenty years ago, with little sign of the relentless strategic focus on and commitment to basic skills – backed up with funding to support implementation across a range of fronts – that was evident then.⁸ The entitlement to fully funded basic skills training for any adult who needs it is of course a critically important policy commitment, and evidence suggests that making basic skills provision free to adults is necessary to increase participation.⁹ But such an entitlement alone is not enough and more attention may need to be given to policy implementation.¹⁰ For example, the impact of the basic skills entitlement may be limited by lack of awareness of its existence among eligible adults and inadequate access to information, advice and guidance to support engagement and participation. Evidence from the 2021 Adult Participation in Learning Survey¹¹ shows that in England, only two in five adults are aware that free English and maths courses are available. Adults with lower levels of qualifications, adults who left full-

⁶ BIS (2015) *International Evidence Review of Basic Skills: learning from high performing and improving countries* <http://www.nrdc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/bis-15-33-international-review-of-adult-basic-skills-learning-from-high-performing-and-improving-countries.pdf>

⁷ BIS, *International Evidence Review*.

⁸ L&W, *Getting the Basics Right*.

⁹ European Commission (2015) *In-Depth Analysis*

¹⁰ BIS, *International Evidence Review*.

¹¹ L&W (2021), *Adult Participation in Learning Survey*

time education earlier and those who have not recently engaged in learning are all less likely to be aware. It is well recognised that increasing adults' disposition towards learning and communicating the relevance, value and benefits of improving basic skills require active and resourced policy interventions.¹²

The case studies suggest that securing adult participation in basic skills learning presents a challenge across countries and regions, notwithstanding the fact that such provision is generally fully funded for learners. They also show a range of responses that seek to address this. The development of dedicated basic skills strategies, implementation plans and action plans signals political commitment and an intention to move beyond policy pronouncements to focus on how they will be delivered in practice in order to increase the proportion of adults who participate in learning and improve their basic skills (e.g. Australia, Switzerland). Funding and support have also been dedicated to implementation activities such as awareness-raising campaigns (e.g. Germany, Switzerland), outreach via partner organisations (all cases), and increased learning provision (all cases).

At the same time, there is a tension between the existence of a universal funded basic skills entitlements on the one hand and limited funding in the other, and this may hamper implementation. While the scale of the funding cuts in England presents a stark illustration of this, the case studies suggest it is also a cause for concern in countries where funding has increased (e.g. Switzerland).

Systems based approach

The policy challenge of adult basic skills overlaps with a range of other social policy concerns. Indeed, while the case studies suggest a broad consensus that basic skills means literacy, language, numeracy and digital, some strategies explicitly include areas such as health and financial literacy in their definitions (e.g. Germany). This interconnectedness points to the need for a systems based approach to policy development and implementation which draws in the breadth of stakeholders with an interest in improving literacy and numeracy at all levels.¹³

At national and regional level, this means ensuring that there is both synergy between and coordination across government departments and agencies, and partnership building with learning providers and the plethora of wider organisations in the public, private and third sectors that are in touch with learners and can support delivery. Cross-policy collaboration can facilitate the alignment of ABS with wider services such as employment support and migrant integration, which extends reach and engagement. To be effective, it needs to be underpinned by systems, structures and processes that actively promote collaboration between the agencies and organisations that can drive implementation.

¹² European Commission (2015) *An In-depth Analysis of Adult Learning Policies and their Effectiveness in Europe* <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=7851&type=2&furtherPubs=yes>

¹³ BiS, *International Evidence Review*.

The case studies show examples of a range of ways in which a systems approach to policy has been developed, and how this has helped to build support for basic skills strategy:

- Cross-government approach (e.g. Switzerland)
- Partnerships between national and regional governments (e.g. Australia, Germany, Norway, Switzerland)
- Networks and partnerships to foster cross-sector stakeholder collaboration to support delivery (e.g. Australia, Germany, Norway)

A systems based approach also integrates basic skills into the wider skills and lifelong learning system.¹⁴ In England, the inclusion of basic skills in the national skills strategy could be seen as a way of trying to achieve this. Case studies show how elsewhere basic skills is positioned within a system that incorporates all post-compulsory learning from basic skills to higher education (e.g. Australia). Where countries are seeking to move basic skills up the policy agenda, the fact that it is referenced in the overarching national skills strategy has been identified as a way of raising its profile across the skills system (e.g. Norway). Case study interviewees stressed the importance of a systems approach for supporting progression and upskilling, facilitating the development of entry and progression pathways (e.g. Australia, Norway). The evidence indicates concern about the risk of a national “race to the bottom” in terms of skills and productivity if due attention is not paid to the provision and support that enables basic skills learning to act as a gateway to higher skills.

Skills policy devolution

Approximately 50 per cent of the Adult Education Budget is now devolved to regional level. England has one of the most centralised political systems by international standards, and with devolution very much a work in progress, it is relevant to consider what the case studies suggest about the interplay of national and regional basic skills policy.

Three of the case studies in particular (Australia, Germany and Switzerland) have highly decentralised systems, and present a mixed picture of skills devolution. In Australia and Germany, national basic skills strategies have been launched as partnerships between the federal government and regional governments but appear to have been under-resourced and suffered from weak implementation. However, these shortcomings at national level have not undermined regional approaches to the implementation of well-developed regional skills strategies in which basic skills is a priority. Indeed, the overwhelming sense from the research is that these national strategies have been largely irrelevant for the organisations developing and delivering regional basic skills policy. In contrast in Switzerland, the national strategy, which is likewise a partnership between the federal and

¹⁴ European Commission (2015) *An In-Depth Analysis of Adult Learning Policies*.

state governments, has helped to overcome the cantons' historically laissez-faire approach to basic skills by channelling funding and support to address market failure.

Language provision for migrants

England's exclusion of ESOL from the national entitlement to fully funded learning stands in contrast to the position in all the countries included as case studies. Migrant language learning is prioritised and several interviewees stressed that migrant language learners make up the majority of those on basic skills courses (e.g. Australia, Norway). In the case of Australia, the federal government has committed to fully funding all migrant language learners to a certain level, although it does not provide resource on an equivalent basis for other basic skills.

It is worth noting that some interviewees hinted that it has been easier to make the case politically for funding migrant language learning because this does not carry the implication of shortcomings in the national school system. Across all the case study countries, evidence of low basic skills in the non-migrant population from international surveys such as PIAAC has been critical for making the case for the development of basic skills strategies and the allocation of funding to support the work.

Support for delivery organisations

Support for delivery organisations is a key element of effective policy implementation. The commitment to building capacity in the adult basic skills sector expressed through *Skills for Life*, particularly its approach to teacher training and the development of a coherent programme of research, has been cited as a model to follow. However, it is also recognised that subsequent policy in England has not sustained or built on these strengths, but rather allowed support to dwindle.¹⁵ Recent research has pointed to challenges in areas such as workforce capacity, with a shortage of specialist basic skills tutors in the FE sector.¹⁶

The case studies suggest that difficulties with recruiting a sufficient number of basic skills tutors is a problem experienced across national contexts, not least due to competition from the school sector. However, the research also highlights a range of ways in which policies have sought to develop and support the capacity of delivery partners.

- Strengthening the basic skills workforce, including requirements for tutors to have recognised teaching qualifications (e.g. Australia, Switzerland) and the development of programmes to support continuing professional development (e.g. Australia, Norway).

¹⁵ BIS, *International Evidence Review*.

¹⁶ OECD (2020) *Raising the Basic Skills of Workers in England* https://www.oecd.org/skills/centre-for-skills/Raising_the_Basic_Skills_of_Workers_in_England_Report_Summary.pdf

- Resource development to promote quality and consistency of provision, including standardised assessment tools and tailored teaching materials (e.g. Australia, Norway, Switzerland).
- Networking and research to enable providers and practitioners to better understand the needs of potential learners and how to respond to these (e.g. Australia, Germany).

Delivery models

Evidence consistently points to the importance of policy supporting diverse delivery models and approaches, including flexible and embedded provision, to reach, engage and motivate learners with basic skills needs. Embedding delivery in the workplace is widely recognised as a highly effective approach to encouraging participation by tackling barriers associated with lack of time and low motivation, particularly as a large proportion of adults with basic skills needs are in work. Employer engagement and learner engagement are both critical, raising awareness of the benefits of improving basic skills for both individuals and employers, together with careers advice and guidance for individuals.¹⁷ To reach adults not in work, models of basic skills delivery in the community and via other learning programmes can be effective in promoting participation.¹⁸ The embedding of basic skills provision in Apprenticeships in England has been identified as an example of current effective practice.¹⁹

The development of a diverse basic skills offer is a feature of the case studies. Embedded provision in the workplace or in the context of work is a key strand (e.g. Australia, Germany, Norway, Switzerland), as is provision in the community which focuses on wider interests (e.g. Germany, Norway, Switzerland). There are also examples of how embedding basic skills for learners who need it has been made mandatory for all courses developed with public funding (e.g. Australia, Switzerland). In common with the situation in England, the difficulty of engaging SMEs in supporting basic skills training among their workforce is apparent (e.g. Norway).

¹⁷ BIS, *International Evidence Review*; OECD, *Raising the Basic Skills of Workers in England*.

¹⁸ European Commission (2015) *Support for Work on Policy Guidance on Basic Skills for Adults* <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0898fd65-8777-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1>

¹⁹ OECD, *Raising the Basic Skills of Workers in England*.

3. Case studies

Australia: Adult basic skills policy in the state of Victoria

Overview of policy on adult basic skills

Skills policy in Australia is the Constitutional responsibility of the self-governing states and territories, although since the early 1990s there has been formal shared policy responsibility with the federal government.

In respect of foundation skills, the federal government produced a ten-year national foundation skills strategy for adults in 2013 in partnership with the governments of the states and territories, which aimed to promote a more consistent focus on improving the basic skills of adults of working age (defined as those aged 15 to 64). Data suggest that, while Australia performs relatively well on international comparative measures of literacy and numeracy, it has a “long tail” of adults with low skills levels within the population who are at risk of wage stagnation, redundancy and lack of opportunities. A change of federal government shortly after the strategy was published resulted in cuts to the funding and support for implementation. Industry and employers have been vocal in calling for more investment in adult basic skills, particularly in workplace provision. The strategy is currently being reviewed and national initiatives such as the Foundation Skills for Your Future Program support a range of projects and provision. However, state and territory policy plays a key role in setting priorities and supporting participation.

Delivery of adult basic skills in Australia is typically embedded within vocational education and training (VET) courses. In line with vocational education being an open access post-school education sector, those presenting with needs in literacy and numeracy needs, and now digital skills needs, to access work should be offered support as part of their course.

The state of Victoria takes pride in its approach to education and regards itself as a leader nationally in the sphere of adult and further education. Victoria has a strong tradition of adult community education and also delivers adult basic skills through this route. Branded as Learn Local, this community-based provision is delivered chiefly by third sector organisations and sits outside the Australian Qualifications Framework. It focuses on engaging and motivating adults with basic skills needs through pre-accredited basic skills programmes and supporting progression to accredited training which may be delivered outside mainstream VET qualifications.

The Ministerial Statement, The Future of Adult Community Education in Victoria 2020-25, signals the state government’s strategic commitment to the sector and sets out a six-year reform agenda. It identifies the following three key roles for adult community education:

- To engage and support adult learners who need to develop their core foundation skills for work, further study, and to participate in society as valued citizens.

- To play a lead role in adult literacy, numeracy, employability and digital skills education and training for Victorians.
- To support workers who may be vulnerable to becoming unemployed to develop the skills necessary to remain and thrive in employment as work changes.

The Statement prioritises a focus on adult basic skills. Usually termed foundation skills in Australia, these include English language and literacy, numeracy, digital and employability skills. The term core skills is also widely used, and defined in the Australian Core Skills Framework as learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy. In practice, it appears that the terms foundation and core skills are widely used synonymously, interchangeably and even together (as in the first bullet point above).

Funding and entitlements

As described below, public funding for pre-accredited adult community education is comprised of state funding and routed through the Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) board and prioritised for foundation skills. Federal funding, via direct contracting arrangements with Victorian training providers is provided to support recent migrants with English language needs as part of a national entitlement to a specified amount of fully funded learning.

Access to foundation skills within the VET system is the responsibility of individual states and territories, each of which has a set of entitlement rules which are designed to encourage people into training. It is generally the case that most adults with foundation skills needs have other attributes which effectively entitle them to free training.

Stakeholder roles, responsibilities and cooperation

Recent skills reforms in Victoria aim toward a connected and coherent approach across adult community education, technical and vocational education and higher education. The Victorian Government has recently established the Victorian Skills Authority, an agency of the Department for Education and Training, to engage and collaborate across sectors and with industry and communities to plan for future skills.

Responsibility for leading adult community and further education in the state sits with the ACFE Board, a legislative board with a chair and paid members who are appointed with the aim of reflecting the breadth and diversity of adult education interests in Victoria. Functioning as a mechanism for connecting different stakeholders, the board builds partnerships with delivery partners, employers, industry, the community sector and across government. Its role includes public promotion of adult learning, undertaking research, allocating funding and advising the responsible minister. Charged with leading delivery of the agenda set out in the Ministerial Statement, the board has produced a five-year implementation strategy to achieve this and reports on progress every six months directly

to the minister.²⁰ This strategy was developed through a process of extensive stakeholder consultation, a scan of the operating environment (including Victorian Government policy priorities), and a review of relevant research literature and board's previous ACFE strategy (2016-19).

The board is also responsible for allocating resources for the delivery of adult community education. It acts as the conduit for funding from the Victorian Government to around 250 registered Learn Local adult community education providers including AMES Australia which provides English language training, employment support and other resettlement services to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.. Among the priorities set out in the board's strategy is a requirement that all pre-accredited courses developed with funding from the board must embed language, literacy, numeracy, employability and digital (LLNED) skills training relevant to learner need and be designed to foster learner success.

Support for delivery organisations

Strengthening and capacity building of the adult community education sector is a key aim in the implementation of skills policy in Victoria and a strategic priority for the ACFE Board. Work to date has focused on the following areas.

- The centralised development of quality pre-accredited teaching resources. These include resources to support a suite of ten-hour embedded foundation digital skills courses for use within vocational training programmes for ten occupational areas. The development of employability skills resources is also underway.
- AUD3 million has been allocated by the Victorian government to develop an online core skills assessment tool. Many different tools are currently used by delivery partners, and this work is looking at the potential for developing a premium product. Both the pre-accredited and accredited training markets are in scope for this project (with settings to be confirmed), noting that flexible approaches are needed for assessing learners across this range of settings.
- AUD1 million has been allocated for the training and development of the sector workforce.
- ACFE and the Skills Authority is developing a multicultural learning partnership. In the wake of the pandemic, it was recognised that more attention should be focused on understanding and responding to the learning needs of adults from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, who form over 50 per cent of learners on adult community provision. Migrant English language programmes are the largest single area of publicly funded foundation skills activity in the state. The partnership is a way of bringing stakeholders together to address this concern.

²⁰ [file:///C:/Users/hplan/Downloads/Adult-Community-and-Further-Education-Board-Strategy-2020-25%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/hplan/Downloads/Adult-Community-and-Further-Education-Board-Strategy-2020-25%20(1).pdf)

- Work is underway to map and develop local entry and progression pathways from pre-accredited foundation skills courses to vocational skills training. The Skills Authority is bringing together Learn Local providers and Victoria's 16 TAFE institutes to identify what is needed in each local area.

Achievements and strengths

Victoria has sought to establish a strong policy environment which prioritises the development and delivery of foundation skills training within adult community education. There is a clear commitment at ministerial level and a strong governance framework through the ACFE Board. Alongside this, the reforms towards connected post-school education and training aim to integrate foundation skills into the wider post-compulsory learning ecology and support engagement and progression. Interviewees for this case study suggested that this approach sets Victoria apart from other states and territories and affords a number of strengths and benefits.

First, it means that there is in effect a state-wide adult education and training system. This stands in contrast to the overwhelmingly market-focused approach which has prevailed in Australia in recent decades which has seen individual providers setting their own agenda, sometimes at the expense of the foundation skill needs of learners. They stressed that this more coherent approach is not a rejection of the idea that local decision making is best, but rather aims to provide a framework to support better local action and ensure quality and consistency for learners. It also allows inefficiencies to be addressed, for example, in the centralised creation of quality resources which providers can choose to use (or not) and adapt for their own context.

Secondly, the delivery of foundation skills through adult community education provides an effective means of reaching and engaging adults with basic skills needs. Community based organisations are skilled in identifying basic skills needs, developing motivation to learn and supporting learning in a facilitative way which recognises and respects learners' individual starting points. Referred to by one interviewee as an "engagement and attachment" approach, foundation skills are contextualised in work-focused training that is accessible and to overcome the stigma associated with low basic skills.

Thirdly, it enables individuals to develop a robust and genuine "foundation" of basic skills which supports their progression. As was noted above, foundation skills training in Australia are usually delivered within VET qualifications. However, interviewees stated that linking foundation skills so tightly to VET and the needs of the labour market has been to the detriment of genuinely addressing adults' learning needs and presents the biggest structural challenge to systemically addressing foundation skills effectively in Australia. In practice, the attention paid to foundation skills within VET programmes can be marginal to the development of technical skills and can be insufficient to provide a base on which an individual can build to progress their learning and employment. It was suggested that this failure adequately and appropriately to address foundation skills within VET can capture graduates in low-paid and insecure work. The interviewees postulated that this could be

one of the causes of the wage stagnation that Australia has experienced, as many in the workforce have been trained for process work and lack the underpinning basic skills to enable them to move into better jobs.

Victoria is aiming to take a holistic approach to developing skills within the individual, both through unaccredited provision and through a number of adult basic skills qualifications which continue to be available in the state. Empirical evidence collected from the adult and further education sector suggests that individuals with foundation skills needs who take unaccredited learning first are more likely to succeed when they progress to accredited provision. ACFE is undertaking further work to develop this evidence base.

Challenges and areas for development

As discussed above, at a national level, the marginal treatment of foundation skills within VET qualifications presents a significant issue for Australia. Foundation skills was described by an interviewee as a “second or third order issue” within this approach. Furthermore, it was suggested that the marketisation of and cuts in funding to adult education and skills in recent decades have compromised efforts to solve the challenge of low adult basic skills. For providers struggling to attract students and maximise income in a market context, the easiest thing to drop is often foundation skills.

Within the Victorian context, interviewees identified several issues that foundation skills policy is currently confronting.

- Hesitancy to return to learning in the wake of the pandemic is a significant challenge. While evidence points to some recovery in participation figures, particularly where providers have developed digital delivery models, questions remain about how best to overcome the pandemic’s wider social impacts.
- Thin markets exist in the more sparsely populated parts of the state, which makes the model of having a shop front presence for Learn Local in every community problematic. In order to establish a local presence to reach the small number of potential learners, Learn Local is trialling a “hub and spoke” model in three rural areas, working through voluntary organisations which are already established in local communities, such as community housing providers working with refugees.

Germany: AphaDekade 2016-26

Overview of policy on adult basic skills

Adult education policy in Germany is the responsibility of the individual federal states. However, for the past decade, the Federal Government has worked with the federal states to provide national strategic support for adult basic skills. Current policy is framed as a “national decade for literacy and basic skills,” known as AlphaDekade 2016-26. Led by the Ministry of Education and Research, AlphaDekade is the product of a formal agreement between the Federal Government and the federal states and is being implemented at national and regional levels. Total funding of EUR180 million has been allocated to AlphaDekade, of which EUR60 million has been divided between the 16 federal states. AlphaDekade funding is intended to support projects and initiatives aimed at increasing participation in basic skills training. This includes research, campaigns, regional networks and the development and testing of innovative delivery models to reach key target groups.²¹

In the context of AlphaDekade, basic skills are defined as “competencies in the basic dimensions for independent cultural and social participation, including literacy, numeracy, digital skills, health education, financial and social competences.” To foster this broad understanding of basic skills, the policy agreement states the intention to promote the inclusion of literacy and basic skills as “interdisciplinary objectives” in other social policy areas.

AlphaDekade builds on National Strategy for Literacy and Basic Skills for Adults in Germany, 2012-16. The initial strategy was developed in response to international evidence of basic skills needs and research from the University of Hamburg which suggested that at least 6.2 million adults in Germany lacked basic literacy skills, a much higher figure than had previously been thought.²² The plan for a national decade focusing on adult basic skills was formulated with the aim of signalling increased ambition beyond the first National Strategy and building a wider partnership of stakeholders. Negotiations between the Federal Government and the federal states to reach agreement on the proposed content and budget took several years. AlphaDekade development work was also influenced by the European Commission’s Upskilling Pathways initiative.

Funding and entitlements

Each of the individual federal states is responsible for setting its own policy on basic skills funding and entitlements, and considerable variation exists in the statutory arrangements relating to basic skills in each state. While AlphaDekade aims to support the federal states to develop and promote basic skills training, it does not challenge the decentralized nature of policymaking in this area.

²¹https://www.bibb.de/dokumente/pdf/EN_General_Agreement_on_the_National_Decade_for_Literacy_and_Basic_Skills.pdf

²² <https://leo.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/leo-Press-brochure15-12-2011.pdf>

The example of one federal state involved with the development of this case study illustrates how basic skills funding and entitlements operate. The state's adult education law states that adults have a statutory right to access adult basic skills close to their home. To enable this to happen, local adult education institutions are required to provide basic skills courses as part of their mandatory offer which also includes "second chance" learning, political / civic education, cultural education, European languages, education for sustainable development, and learning for health and wellbeing. The funding model for adult education institutions is based on the principle of tripartite funding, with one third being paid by the federal state, one third by the locality and one third by the learner. However, it is recognised that adults with basic skills needs are unlikely to be able to fund learning at that level, so a nominal fee (e.g. EUR1 / hour) is charged. Basic skills courses are cross-subsidised with higher fees from other courses and / or slightly higher contributions from the federal state and locality.

Stakeholder roles, responsibilities and coordination

AlphaDekade is a joint initiative of the Federal Government and the federal states and is being implemented at national and regional levels. A wide range of national and regional stakeholders have been brought into an Alliance to deliver and support the decade. Partners include government and civil society organisations in the fields of employment, trade and industry, social and civic bodies, and family, youth and healthcare services. A committee drawn from Alliance partners produces an annual work programme which aligns to the objectives of the decade and defines priorities for action and success measures. A Scientific Advisory Board made up of academic experts in the field of adult basic skills advises the committee on the setting of priorities.

A national coordination point for AlphaDekade has been established at BIBB (the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training). Its role is to support partners and to ensure an overall strategic approach to implementation by leading on matters such as management of Federal Government grants, website development and the annual conference. AlphaDekade was formally launched at its first annual conference in 2016. Participants at the annual conferences included policymakers from Federal Government and the federal states, representatives of adult education institutions and other stakeholder organisations, and projects funded through AlphaDekade. The pandemic interrupted the conferences, although an online meeting was held in 2021.

Implementation at federal state level is determined by the adult education system in place in each state, but broadly consists of partnerships between federal policy makers, adult education institutions and wider social and civic partners to deliver funded projects. Case study interviewees suggested that the commitment to AlphaDekade varies considerably across the federal states. In some cases, states have been very active, with local stakeholders working closely with the federal government to develop and deliver research and development projects.

Types of delivery

AlphaDekade is being delivered through local project-based activity funded from Federal Government grants. A variety of new delivery models are being developed and tested through research and development pilots, including:²³

- 23 workplace basic skills projects (of which 13 have so far been completed), in recognition of the fact that the majority of adults with low basic skills are in work, and as the workplace can play a key role in engaging them in basic skills training.²⁴
- Almost 50 projects linking basic skills to services for everyday life (e.g. education, social care, health, debt advice, early years)
- So-called “low threshold” non-formal, community based offers delivered through multigenerational houses (Mehrgenerationenhaus). Around EUR2 million has been allocated annually to this activity, with around 170 multigenerational houses currently participating.
- Enhanced services for outreach and information, advice and guidance.
- A focus on digital delivery models, which has been developed in response to the pandemic and the need for providers and learners to become quickly familiar with online learning.

In addition, AlphaDekade is also delivering:

- National public awareness-raising campaigns, such as *Reading and Writing – my key to the world* and “Nur Mut!” (“Be Brave!”).
- Research projects, including a 2018 follow-up study by the University of Hamburg, *Living With Low Literacy*, which aimed to generate more accurate data on the extent of the phenomenon of low adult literacy.²⁵

Support for delivery organisations

The website www.alphadekade.de acts as a platform for sharing information about AlphaDekade’s activities and outputs. It provides detailed descriptions of each of the funded development projects, to facilitate the dissemination of emerging and innovative practice and provide access to any materials and resources that have been developed. It also includes links to research reports.

²³ <https://www.alphadekade.de/alphadekade/de/die-projekte/die-projekte.html?nn=669334>

²⁴ https://www.alphadekade.de/alphadekade/de/die-projekte/die-projekte_node.html;jsessionid=C51600995D22605B3B2467E5B0E40EDF.live381

²⁵ https://leo.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/LEO_2018_Living_with_Low_Literacy.pdf

Monitoring and evaluation

The BiBB coordination office produces annual interim monitoring reports on the outcomes of the funded projects. A dedicated closed database has been created to which individual projects can upload monitoring and evaluation data throughout the lifetime of their funded activity.

Case study interviews anticipated that there will be a greater focus on evaluation of AlphaDekade as a whole during the remaining period of the decade.

Achievements and strengths

In the view of case study interviewees, the principal achievement of AlphaDekade has been to raise the profile of basic skills on the national policy agenda. The coalition treaty signed by Germany's new government in November 2021 includes a commitment to provide more funding for basic skills provision and to strengthen offers in this field.

Challenges and areas for development

Interviewees were sceptical about the potential for AlphaDekade to make a significant difference to basic skills provision "on the ground" for a number of reasons.

- The amount of funding allocated to implementing the policy over ten years is very small, both in real terms and in comparison to the resources devoted to delivering policy in other areas of education and research. The decision to divide EUR60 million equally between all federal states in particular was questioned. It was suggested that a more effective approach may have been to fund a small number of research and development projects exploring key cross-cutting strategic issues that would support all federal states to develop their approaches to basic skills.
- Central coordination by BiBB has been largely confined to grant management. For example, there has been very little content coordination to promote the sharing and development of project findings, or policy focused coordination to ensure that funding illuminates the wider economic and social issues associated with low basic skills in the population. How funding has been prioritised has not been clear. As yet, there is no indication of how the second half of the decade will be implemented.
- There is a disconnect at national policy level between AlphaDekade which sits with the Ministry of Education and Research and the elements of basic skills that are located within refugee integration policy which is the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior. These policy silos prevent the achievement of synergies that a more integrated approach could yield.

It is evident from the interviews that activity which supports the development and implementation of basic skills policy in the federal states does so largely independently of AlphaDekade. For example, the basic skills network in one federal state has been active since 2014. It brings together all interested parties, with members including public

administration, universities, adult education institutions, businesses, trades unions, churches, and a range of civil society organisations that are in touch with potential learners. It has four work strands: projects; network development; developing a coherent strategy for basic skills policy in the state; and a public awareness campaign. Workforce training and development is also an area of focus, and it is leading a campaign to increase pay rates for sessional basic skills tutors. The network holds an annual state-wide conference, which has taken place online during the pandemic, as well as at least one conference per year in each of the state's five regional administrative zones and additional local network meetings.

Interviewees suggested that AlphaDecade may have been a missed opportunity to use a national platform to support more effective basic skills policymaking at federal state level. They felt that the policy could have had more impact if it had engaged directly with the federal states' policymaking role, rather than focusing on campaigning and funding many small and disparate projects.

Norway: Implementation through Skills Plus

Overview of policy on adult basic skills

Adults in Norway have a statutory right to basic skills education as part of the wider legal entitlement for everyone to complete learning up to the equivalent of upper secondary level in initial education. The municipality is in charge of offering this education upon request.

To complete this with a more targeted effort to reach adults with basic skills need Norway has since 2006 delivered the Skills Plus programme. Skills Plus covers reading, writing, numeracy, oral communication and digital skills, as well as Norwegian as a second language for adult migrants. It funds locally-developed learning provision and aims to give adults the opportunity to acquire the basic skills they need to keep pace with the demands and changes in modern working life and civil society. The following criteria are key considerations when funding decisions are made for Skills Plus provision:

- The learning activity should be linked to work, voluntary- or daily life activities
- The courses should strengthen the participants' motivation and potential to participate in further education or work
- The courses must be aligned to the competence goals expressed in the *Framework for Basic Skills* or the *Curriculum for Norwegian Language Training for Adult Immigrants*.²⁶

Basic skills are a strategic priority in the Norwegian Skills Strategy 2017-21.²⁷

Although Norway has a consistently high comparative score in the PIAAC survey of adult skills, it is estimated that approximately 400,000 adults (in a total population of just over 5 million) have basic skills needs. The *Skills Strategy* expresses concern to strengthen and protect Norway's established position as a high-skill, high value economy in the face of global competition and technological change.

The legal entitlement to learning to upper secondary level was introduced at the turn of this century and is rooted in agreement between the government and social partners. It initiated a programme of skills policy development which aims to provide adults with better opportunities for training and skills enhancement. The Competence Development Programme (KUP) was one of the early elements of the reform and sought to stimulate the development of the market for continuing education in Norway. The KUP provided support to:

²⁶ <https://www.kompetansenorge.no/globalassets/norsk-og-samfunnskunnskap/curriculum-for-norwegian-language-training-for-adult-immigrants-level-c1.pdf>

²⁷ <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/3c84148f2f394539a3eefdfa27f7524d/strategi-kompetanse-eng.pdf>

- develop training programmes that are better adapted to the needs of working life
- develop better collaboration between providers of training, employers and individuals
- stimulate the demand side in the skills market.

KUP funded a number of pilot projects to test different approaches to basic skills delivery in working life. This resulted in the Skills Plus-program that began in 2006. Skills Plus has since been extended and developed into a mainstream programme with a number of distinct target groups and delivery routes which are described below in more detail.

Funding and entitlements

Skills Plus is funded by the Ministry of Education and Research. Organisations and individual learners contribute the time required to participate in the programme. Some enterprises allow their staff time off to join courses during work time.

Providers and tutors are paid through public funding and the tuition is free of charge for learners.

Stakeholder roles, responsibilities and coordination

Skills Plus is funded by from the national budget via the Ministry of Education and Research and is administered by the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (DHUK), an executive agency of the Ministry. DHUK in effect leads basic skills policy implementation, being responsible for developing and administering Skills Plus and advising the Ministry on matters concerning adult basic skills policy.

While the strategic framework for Skills Plus has been developed nationally, responsibility for delivery rests with the municipalities, which receive funding allocations for the programme. The Skills Plus approach is based on partnerships between education providers on the one hand and public and private sector employers and voluntary organisations on the other. Any public or private enterprise or third sector organisation in Norway can apply for funding under the most appropriate Skills Plus strand. Working with an education provider, the applicant organisation must define and map their own and the participants' needs and show how they plan to develop and deliver provision which meets those needs. Funded partnerships are responsible for engaging and supporting their learners directly.

Types of delivery

The Skills Plus approach is based on the principle that reaching and engaging adults with low basic skills means taking the learning to them and making it relevant to their needs and interests. Basic skills are not promoted as the main aim of the offer. Rather, basic skills learning is embedded in provision which is presented to learners as a means of improving vocational skills and prospects or developing skills in an area of personal interest. The courses should increase participants' motivation to learn and encourage

them to progress to further learning. The programme has a number of strands, each targeted at different potential learner groups and with distinct delivery routes.

- Skills Plus for Work (workplace delivery). Any enterprise in Norway, private and public, can apply for funding. The training should be linked to work and basic skills training be combined with relevant job-related learning.
- Skills Plus vocational training (workplace delivery). This strand targets adults who have been in the workforce for some years but do not have formal vocational qualifications. It supports them to gain basic skills while also working towards vocational qualifications in their occupational area.
- Skills Plus for Everyday Life (community delivery). Funding for is allocated to third sector organisations for delivery in the community. This strand was developed in recognition of the fact that voluntary organisations can be valuable resources and provide good learning environments for basic skills training for – also unemployed – adults. .

Support for delivery organisations

DHUK provides a range of nationally developed support for local organisations delivering basic skills. All training delivered through Skills Plus must align with Norway's *Competence Goals for Basic Skills*,²⁸ which sets out national standards for reading and writing, numeracy, digital skills and oral skills. For each skill area, descriptors are structured around an example local curriculum which is split into four levels and expressed in the form of intended learning outcomes.

Other materials and resources which have been produced by DHUK to support teaching and learning include:

- An online basic skills course for adults.
- Basic skills job profiles covering 18 occupations, which are designed to facilitate the design of basic skills courses tailored to the needs of each workplace and individual learner.²⁹ The profiles are based on the national competence goals.
- Workforce development for basic skills tutors, including a funded study programme for specialist basic skills teacher training and professional development seminars and meetings.

²⁸https://www.kompetansenorge.no/contentassets/6c78ef4022c948348f473f322e00a07d/lm_publ_engelsk_siste.pdf

²⁹ <https://www.kompetansenorge.no/English/Basic-skills/basic-job-skills-profiles/>

Monitoring and evaluation

A statistical database to capture the work of Skills Plus has been built up since the programme began in 2006 and annual reports are made to the Ministry. In addition, the Ministry has periodically commissioned more detailed evaluations.

However, it should be stressed that throughout the Norwegian education system, “the emphasis is on trust and ‘soft accountability’ rather than quantitative measures of accountability.”³⁰ Thus adult basic skills programmes, whether delivered in the workplace or in the community, are assessed not on the basis of skills gains or qualifications gains for participants, but through other metrics such as participation, satisfaction, and the impact that the learning has on factors such as personal confidence and engagement in family and community life.

Achievements and strengths

Interviewees for this case study stressed that, as Skills Plus is not classed as formal education, its courses do not form part of the official record of each participant’s educational and employment career. As such, this makes measuring learning effects and outcomes difficult. Nevertheless, the programme is regarded as a great success. Funding and participation have increased every year since it was established in 2006 and the number of adults who have received training now is about 100,000. It has boosted the skills of the working age population and contributed towards more adults taking part in education and training, or even getting vocational certificate..

Evaluations of the programme show positive impacts both for participating businesses (e.g. better workplace communication, increased productivity, reduced sickness absence, better customer service) and for individuals (e.g. increased self-esteem, improved performance in the workplace, better problem-solving, increased motivation, progression to further learning, increased engagement with family and leisure interests).

As an international review of adult basic skills policy in high-performing countries produced for the UK government in 2016 observed, “Norway has a well-developed adult basic skills policy system.”³¹ It has a strong focus on workplace basic skills delivery and on improving the literacy and language skills of migrants. While not cheap, Skills Plus is viewed as highly effective. What began as a pilot project has been successfully mainstreamed into a coherent approach to supporting adult basic skills across different settings. Its status as a national programme provides consistency of approach for partners and learners. The inclusion of basic skills in the national skills strategy was identified by interviewees as

³⁰ BIS (2015) *International Evidence Review of Basic Skills: learning from high performing and improving countries* BIS (2015), <http://www.nrdc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/bis-15-33-international-review-of-adult-basic-skills-learning-from-high-performing-and-improving-countries.pdf>

³¹ BIS (2015) *International Evidence Review of Basic Skills: learning from high performing and improving countries* BIS (2015), <http://www.nrdc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/bis-15-33-international-review-of-adult-basic-skills-learning-from-high-performing-and-improving-countries.pdf>

having further helped to raise the profile of Skills Plus and connect it to the wider skills system.

Interviewees highlighted a range of factors that have been critical to the success of basic skills policy:

- Stakeholder collaboration, particularly between government, social partners and the voluntary sector, has been highly effective in driving policy development and implementation and securing funding. This builds on and reflects the established collaborative approach to policymaking in Norway.
- The high level of workforce participation and well-established culture of skills development within the workforce make the workplace a strong site for embedding basic skills learning. Much of the training takes place on site in working hours, making it easier for adults to participate.
- Training providers are funded to undertake employer engagement, learner outreach and engagement, and to lead on funding applications, enabling the development of robust delivery partnerships at local level.
- The availability of training through third sector organisations provides a route to engagement and participation via the interests and concerns of daily life, making learning relevant and accessible for those outside the workplace.
- Ensuring quality and consistency in delivery has been a key focus. This is exemplified in the development of learning and teaching resources outlined above, the use of national standards, and in prioritising projects with tutors with formal education in teaching basic skills.

Challenges and areas for development

The general sense is that, while a favourable policy environment exists to support basic skills, some aspects of implementation could be stronger. Both the interviewees for this case study and the earlier UK research acknowledged that the basic skills entitlement alone does not mean that adults take up the opportunities to learn. Interviewees pointed to a number of factors which they believe impact negatively on basic skills participation.

- The municipalities do not vigorously promote and encourage adult basic skills learning because they have limited funding to cover adult education and would not wish to “over-stimulate” demand beyond a level which they can meet. Their priority for improving basic skills within the population is to encourage more people to stay in school to upper secondary level.
- It can be difficult to get sufficient numbers of learners to create viable class sizes in some areas. The use of digital solutions is hindered by fact that for individual adults, low digital skills often coexist alongside low basic skills. Furthermore, while

engagement with digital learning has necessarily grown during the pandemic. joining a class in person remains an important motivation for many.

- The emphasis on anchoring basic skills training within the workplace works best for larger organisations which can afford the time for their workforce to access provision. Although the programme attempts to engage small and medium sized organisations, levels of participation remain low and DHUK recognises the need to do more in this regard.

It was also suggested that development work is needed to strengthen progression pathways from Skills Plus provision to further learning, with a focus on supporting adults to progress to formal learning and higher-level qualifications.

Switzerland: National and regional strategic cooperation

Overview of policy on adult basic skills

Prior to 2017, all further education policy was set at cantonal level. Learning is treated as a matter of individual responsibility, state actors subsidised the offer of providers of basic skills (performance agreements). Offers were subsidised by cantons still then. In 2017, the Federal Act on Continuing Education and Training came into force. It was the first national law which aimed to regulate education and training through a legal framework.

The strategy sets out five principles which should govern all continuing education and training which receives public funding from either the federal state or cantons. These principles are:

- Responsibility. Responsibility for continuing education and training rests primarily with the individual, but employers, government and cantons also have responsibility for supporting and subsidising individual learning.
- Quality: Although providers are responsible for quality, the law aims to ensure greater transparency and guarantee improvement in the quality of publicly promoted continuing education and training in four areas: information on what is on offer, the qualifications of instructors, the learning programmes, the qualification process.
- Recognising achievement. There should be greater transparency in acknowledging educational achievements, including recognition of prior learning.
- Equal opportunities: The law aims to achieve equal opportunities for publicly supported continuing education and training.
- Competition: Subsidised continuing education and training must not distort competition.³²

The law introduces for the first time, that federal level and cantons establish a common strategy for the promotion of basic skills and agree on common objectives of their promotion. The primary aim of the strategy is to increase demand for and participation in adult basic skills learning. The strategy for basic skills training provides dedicated funding to support the delivery of basic skills. Basic skills are defined as literacy (the ability to read, write and speak in one of the four national languages), numeracy and digital skills. The allocation of public funding is unique in Swiss further education sector. Funding of CHF15 million was allocated to basic skills in the strategy, and when the strategy was renewed for a further four-year period in 2021 this was increased to CHF100 million.

Crucially, as a framework law, the strategy also provides a mechanism for increasing demand for basic skills and leveraging in cross-government funding by linking with wider

³² <https://alice.ch/en/continuing-education-in-switzerland/federal-act-on-continuing-education-and-training/>

policies that target adults who may have basic skills needs. It requires that basic skills should be promoted in the delivery of policies including migrant integration services, support for unemployed adults and social welfare.

The 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) revealed a high level of basic skills needs not only within the migrant population but also among adults who were born and educated in Switzerland. In the same year, a referendum vote was passed in favour of adding an article in the constitution stating that adults have the right to further education. However, over ten years of sustained lobbying and advocacy by the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB) and partners including trade unions, employers, political groups and voluntary organisations were needed before this became law, with funding to support implementation.

The proposed law faced opposition because it represented a significant break with the established approach in Switzerland, which stresses above all private individuals' responsibility for participation in and funding of further education. Traditionally the emphasis has been on a market-based approach, so the case had to be made that while there is not a market for basic skills, there is a need which is sufficiently important to warrant public funding support. The argument had to be won that there should be state support to allow a suitable offer to be developed to reach and engage adults with basic skills needs.

Funding and entitlements

For everything that cantons spend on basic skills, the national government will double it, up to a maximum sum allocated to the canton according to the size of its population. Adults with basic skills needs are not legally entitled to full funding for basic skills learning, although cantonal schools can use public funding to offer basic literacy and numeracy courses for free. Private providers can offer subsidised courses.

Funding is attached to individuals, not providers. The current policy provides the possibility to subsidise the offer in Cantons needing to build up an offer. Generally, attaching funding to the individual carries the risk that providers may lack the motivation to develop a basic skills offer if demand in the locality is deemed to be low, because they will not draw in sufficient funding from individuals to cover the cost of developing, promoting and delivering a course.

Stakeholder roles, responsibilities and cooperation

The strategy is based on a cross-government, cross policy approach. As stated above, it sets out a legal framework which requires that basic skills be promoted across related policy contexts such as migrant integration, unemployment support and social welfare. Any programmes being delivered under these policy areas must also include basic skills provision for those adults who need it. The potential scale of demand through these routes is huge, and indeed much greater than from adults simply enrolling on basic skills provision via learning providers.

Nevertheless, the strategy is limited in operational detail. It is up to the 26 individual cantons to determine how to implement it to reflect local needs and circumstances. Each of the cantons is responsible for working with partner organisations including learning providers and the voluntary sector to build demand for basic skills and develop suitable provision. Working with “multiplier organisations” – those that are in touch with adults who have basic skills needs – is recognised as being key to reaching and engaging potential learners.

It has taken a while to work out the details of how these partnerships can best be achieved in practice, and to build the necessary stakeholder relationships and commitment at national and local levels. Much work has been done to develop stakeholders’ awareness and understanding of what basic skills provision should look like for target groups such as unemployed adults, migrants and asylum seekers, as well as Swiss population attending school in Switzerland what the key interfaces are, and how the different parts of the system should work together. The process of “inter-institutional collaboration and coordination” has been adopted, which is a recognised approach in Switzerland for bringing organisations together to deliver policy. A large-scale independent research project has been commissioned which is currently seeking to understand what the process means for the development of basic skills policy and practice at national level as well as cantonal levels. It is exploring the different organisational interfaces and how they can be strengthened and developed to promote basic skills. Another important forum for bringing partners together and supporting policy development and implementation at national level is the special interest group on adult basic skills coordinated by SVEB since 2011. This group includes providers and other social partners and is recognised as playing a vital role in building the policy implementation infrastructure.

Support for delivery organisations

SVEB, together with partners such as the Swiss Association for Reading and Writing, is providing a range of support to providers to build demand, develop provision and deliver basic skills in line with the principles set out in the strategy. For example:

- Unrelated to basic skills, SVEB had developed a digital system for education vouchers, but it attracted little demand. However, one of the cantonal representatives approached SVEB and suggested it be used for basic skills offers. The scheme has subsequently been tried out in that canton and been effective in engaging providers and encouraging the development of suitable offers, and helping them to market these opportunities to learners. Each voucher is worth CHF500 and learners can receive two consecutive vouchers in the same year. Participation in basic skills has risen considerably in the trial canton due to a holistic marketing approach including as many cantonal multiplier institutions as possible. A welcome synergy with the educational vouchers was another SVEB project with A welcome synergy arose with a large social service in this canton that participated in an SVEB project aimed at participation of their clients in basic skills courses. The

intention is that this will embed a commitment to basic skills into the work of partner organisations.

- Awareness is growing of the need for alternative delivery models. SVEB has developed a model for the delivery of workplace basic skills, which is designed to benefit both the employer and the individual. This development work is funded by another legal framework thus being a minor aspect in the basic skills strategy. The funding scheme is not yet sufficiently known by its target group – employers.
- Cantons are starting to develop provision in community settings which targets adults who are not likely to be engaged in traditional classroom learning, as well as basic skills embedded in vocational education and training for adults who in work but do not have the formal qualifications necessary to secure stable employment.
- At a national and cantonal level, SVEB is working to raise awareness about quality assurance and teacher training in basic skills.

Monitoring and evaluation

The cantons are required to report annually to the federal state secretariat. Monitoring is not yet sufficiently established, given the complex structure of basic skills provision across several legal frameworks. The increased funding allocated for the 2022-6 period means that there will need to be greater public accountability, with qualitative and quantitative indicators. Discussions to determine what information will be collected and how are on-going.

Achievements and strengths

The introduction of the strategy with funding attached has been a major development. It is inevitably taking time to develop the structures, systems and processes to enable effective implementation, although progress is being made as outlined above.

Establishing effective stakeholder collaboration and cooperation at cantonal level has been the greatest success to date. This has been a priority for all cantons, although progress has been easier for those which already had well established relationships between public institutions/organisations working with target groups. A key focus of this collaboration has been working with learning providers to map provision and identify gaps in the current offer.

An important aspect of the funding is that it is able to support not only individual learners but also infrastructure organisations and innovation. Five per cent of the national match funding received by the cantons is put into a fund to support innovation and projects. For example, some of the funding is being used for a project to develop new basic skills assessment tools.

Challenges and areas for development

Stakeholders recognise the need to develop a shared vision and mission to underpin the national policy, with agreed common objectives. Discussion has begun towards this.

It remains a challenge to reach out and develop offers that really reflect the needs of the participants, and work on this is ongoing. Partners recognise the importance of strengthening their understanding of target groups and of the different approaches and interventions that are for diverse groups.

The strategy highlights the importance of career guidance and counselling, and the need for better provision for lower levels. However, while career guidance is a well established sector at canton level, providers have difficulty in reaching out to people with low levels of qualifications and basic skills assessment tools currently in use are not suitable for use with the target groups. The recent introduction of a national entitlement for everyone aged 40+ to have four free guidance sessions was very well received with high take-up, but not among those with lower qualification levels. The challenge for the cantons is to improve outreach and engagement for those who remain excluded, for example through multiplier organisations, and with the development of new assessment tools.