



PROJECT BLUESS

Possibilities of development of basic skills in Slovakia – context and starting points

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POLICY BRIEF

Despite the fact that in many EU countries support of the development of literacy in adults is a part of national policies, in Slovakia it has not been paid attention to at the system level so far. There are several reasons why addressing the development of the basic skills of the low-skilled is necessary. One of them is the potential of workforce. The absence of basic skills is also an obstacle to a quality life - personal, work and civic. The problem of understanding written text, using basic mathematical functions in everyday life, or using technology and applications is a serious handicap in today's rapidly changing world, which prevents people from participating in working life or advancing in careers; it limits participation in society and family life and it is also a source of insecurity, low self-esteem, and shame.

The BLUESS project focused on mapping the situation in the area of supporting the level of basic skills of adults in Slovakia. The project was prepared as a part of the implementation of the Recommendation of the Council of the EU of 19 December 2016 "Upskilling Pathways: new opportunities for adults" in the Slovak Republic. The project activities focused on the following objectives:

- To open a debate on the need to address basic skills at national level,
- To map the situation in connection with the possibilities of supporting the level of basic skills of adults in the Slovak Republic with an emphasis on low-skilled adults;
- To identify the main challenges in raising basic skills levels and make recommendations to policy makers in this area;
- To propose tools for assessing the basic skills levels of low-skilled adults;
- To support the staff capacities of practitioners who work or have the potential to work with adults in the field of basic skills development;
- To enable exchange of information and good practice with other countries at the level of policy makers, experts of public administration in order to support creation of parts of national strategies in the field of basic skills development in the Slovak Republic.

The main motivation for mapping the situation in the field of basic skills was to gather relevant information from research and practice and on their basis to confirm or refute the initial assumptions on which the project plan was based, namely:

- The theme of basic skills in Slovakia is not yet professionally understood, there is no wider professional discussion and awareness of actors who should actively engage in its solution (at different levels of the system) is insufficient.
- Existing opportunities to support basic skills are fragmented, they are mostly implemented at the local level and based on the project activities of non-governmental organizations, and occasionally other entities such as employers or academic institutions.
- The definition of target groups affected by the need to develop basic skills is missing, there are no appropriate and sufficient tools at system level to support the development and assessment of basic skills (either by learners or organizations to ensure the development and assessment of basic skills).

For the data, the mapping of the situation in the field of basic skills of adults was based on, the following methodological approaches were implemented within the project: a survey of EU and Slovak strategic documents, an overview of good practice in Slovakia and abroad (Ireland, Netherlands and Norway) and an overview of basic skills measures in selected countries of the European Union in cooperation with foreign partners of the project - European Association for Education of Adults, AONTAS and the European Basic Skills Network, and a survey of the current state of basic skills and target groups using semi-structured interviews using key informants.

1. The project activities confirmed the initial hypotheses of the project plan. Lack of awareness of basic skills and the possibilities and importance of non-formal learning in basic skills among actors who should actively address them is a key barrier to moving forward and developing available opportunities for basic skills development from the perspective of an adult with a low level of education/ insufficient level of qualifications and/or basic skills.
2. At the policy makers level , the area of basic skills in Slovakia began to resonate only in connection with the New Skills Agenda for Europe, which draws attention to the problem of insufficient basic skills for a large number of Europeans. The situation is specific in Slovakia. The share of adults with a low level of educational attainment is one of the lowest among EU countries, but the long-term unemployment rate in this group in Slovakia has long been the highest in comparison with EU countries.
3. At present, the partial diagnosis of basic skills is carried out by the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Offices of the Slovak Republic among registered job seekers. Jobseekers with a low level of basic skills are not able to complete the training programs offered by the active labour market measures (RE-PAS and KOMPAS) due to insufficient skills and the training offer has not included any courses aimed at raising the level of basic skills.
4. Basic skills cannot be a matter for the education sector alone, it requires an inter-ministerial approach, as it concerns employment, health, well-being and living standards, financial and consumer security, democracy and participation in social and civic life. Literacy programs help to develop democratic values, peaceful coexistence and solidarity in the community.
5. A sufficient level of basic skills has been traditionally an expected outcome of the formal education system within primary and lower secondary education in the framework of compulsory school attendance for children and youth. In the context of the rapidly evolving labour market in the 21st century, due to the growing phenomenon of early school leaving or labour migration from abroad, it is necessary to offer educational programs that provide a sufficient level of basic skills for the adult population outside the formal education system.
6. The national concept of basic skills must be established in Slovakia gradually and in addition to the development of practice in the provision of basic skills, which is still limited in Slovakia. The key components of basic skills are reading and mathematical literacy. In recent years, digital skills have also been considered a key component, as we could see during the COVID pandemic. National definitions of basic skills are based on the educational and cultural traditions of individual countries.
7. Development of basic skills through non-formal education is a new topic that has no tradition in Slovakia. The topic of lifelong learning or systematic adult education in relation to groups of adults with a low level of education or qualifications is almost non-existent. There is no systematic evidence about existing courses of further education in the field of basic skills, or activities supporting low-skilled people in the field of literacy, also because they do not fall into the range of educational programs covered by accreditation in accordance with the Act No. 568/2009 Coll. on lifelong learning.
8. The possibilities of providing basic skills are often confused or identified with secondary education respectively by completing lower secondary education in primary or secondary school. The current organizational frameworks of the second-year group are not sufficiently adapted to the needs of adult participants. Some adjustments to the current formal system could lead to improvements, such as extending the duration of the program to more than 1 year and adapting the curriculum. However, functional non-formal education programs in basic skills are a necessary condition for improving the skills of most adults with a low level of education and at the same time a chance for higher participation in formal secondary education programs.
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10. Some actors in the field carry out activities to support basic skills of adults. In case of non-profit organizations, it is mainly work with adults with a low level of education from marginalised Roma communities, who are outside the labour market. Some employers develop activities for employees with a low level of education, too.
11. However, none of the organizations, that support non-formal adult education in the field, implements their activities based on the results of a thoughtful diagnosis of basic skills, but rather intuitively and based on the knowledge of the field and the immediate needs of the target group. Organizations themselves are generally not perceived as providers of non-formal education in basic skills.
12. Identification of target groups of adults with low basic skills and their needs is a key element for the development of non-formal education programs in basic skills and their support from public funds. As the area of basic skills in adults has not been sufficiently mapped in Slovakia so far, we do not have sufficient data on target groups with these needs.
13. The definition of "basic" in relation to skills needs to be seen in a dynamic way, given the rapidly changing needs of employment and society in the 21st century. This dynamic nature of basic skills needs to be recognized, especially when designing system solutions to support basic skills. This corresponds to a broader perception of the low level of adult qualifications. Promoting basic skills is a necessary starting point for any effective policies for the low-skilled.
14. Similarly to the basic skills components, the picture of the target groups is wide and diverse. Different target groups are interconnected and overlap. Overall, the view of the target groups of the actors differs, with the exception of the general consensus of the respondents that the main target group is adults who did not complete all grades of primary school (SKKR 0-1) and adults from marginalized Roma communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING MEASURES AND POLICIES

1. The actors who should be actively involved in addressing the lack of adults' support in basic skills have a low awareness of the possibilities and benefits of non-formal learning in basic skills and their support from public funds. When proposing solutions for the development of practice in non-formal adult education in basic skills, it is important to apply participatory procedures that will lead to the development of professional and practical community and to the design of programs and opportunities that sufficiently reflect the needs and specifics of practice and target groups effectively.
2. Second chance training programs are often seen as the main organizational framework for addressing basic skills shortages, and this may be one of the reasons for the limited progress and even the negative trend in the skills of adults with low levels of education or qualifications. These adults often do not have sufficient basic skills to participate in second chance training programs and other programs where low skill levels could be improved, absent or limited.
3. Second chance programs, as formal education for the completion of lower or upper secondary education, should be provided in a more diverse environment and time structure, as an alternative to the institutional environment in primary and secondary schools. However, formal second chance education programs are neither the exclusive nor the optimal framework for improving the basic skills of adults. Non-formal education in basic skills is a prerequisite for the success of second chance education programs.
4. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for non-formal education programs in basic skills. Basic skills provision programs should be flexible and informal. An important element in increasing the motivation and participation of adult learners is the modularity of such programs, which will enable adult participants in various life situations to gradually complete basic skills courses over a longer period of time. When designing skills programs, it is necessary to take into account the diversity of

- target groups, and to design and provide programs in cooperation with professionals with experience in working with target groups. For disadvantaged communities, educational opportunities must be available and accessible from their residential areas.
5. Assessment of skills for people with low levels of education and qualifications is poorly developed in practice, and it is a necessary condition for the development of the effective non-formal education programs for basic skills and evaluation of their effectiveness. It is therefore necessary to pay specific attention to the possibilities of a wider pilot activity focused at use of the new tools for assessing the level of basic skills - developed in the BLUESS project - in practice in a variety of contexts. Data collected, while using tools to assess the level of basic skills, are an important component of information for mapping target groups and their educational needs.
 6. Basic skills programs must be systematically supported from public funds so that they are able to provide sufficiently long and flexible support for adults with a low level of basic skills. In order to achieve support for the financing of basic skills education from public sources, it is necessary to sensitize actors and the general public for the importance and benefits of involving low-educates/skilled adults in education. Consensus on the importance of supporting basic skills education can be achieved through a multidisciplinary approach and ongoing cooperation between several sectors and groups of actors, while supporting targeted information campaigns.
 7. Cooperation at national and regional levels is of great importance and is also needed for basic skills programs. The significant regional differences in Slovakia are reflected in the structure of skills, and specific programs have to take into account regional specifics. One of the areas of cooperation at several levels of public administration, national regional and local, as well as actors in practice, should be the identification of target groups and quality monitoring at the level of organizations providing education in basic skills and educational programs level.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Title of the project	Plán rozvoja základných zručností na Slovensku – Blueprints for Basic Skills Development in Slovakia – BLUESS
Coordinator	State Vocational Education Institute (www.siov.sk)
Project team	Centre for Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, European Association for Adult Education (EAEA), European Network for Basic Skills (EBSN), AONTAS (Ireland), Association of Adult Education Institutions in Slovakia (AIVD) and Association for Career Counselling and Career Development.
Financial scheme	European Commission - Employment and Social Innovation Programme – EaSI
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Web-page	www.zakladnezrucnosti.sk
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Further resources	Project outputs