Basic Skills for Life, Work and Democratic Participation in Times of Transformation

Reflections from the EBSN Annual Conference 2026, Lisbon

From 17 to 19 June 2026, the European Basic Skills Network gathered in Lisbon for its Annual Conference, organised in cooperation with CLUNL – Research Centre for Linguistics at NOVA University Lisbon. Under the theme **"Basic Skills for Life, Work and Democratic Participation in Times of Transformation"**, the conference brought together practitioners, researchers, policymakers, public agencies, civil society organisations and European partners to discuss how adult basic skills systems can respond to rapid social, technological, economic and democratic change.

The conference was structured to address the policy and practice question: how can adult basic skills move from the margins of education systems to the centre of lifelong learning, social inclusion and democratic resilience? Across three days, the programme connected direct practice experience, national policy reflection, European policy priorities, research evidence, workplace examples and community-based initiatives.

The discussions confirmed that adult basic skills services are no longer a narrow remedial field. Literacy, numeracy, digital skills, communication, critical thinking and citizenship-related competences are increasingly understood as essential conditions for participation in everyday life. They enable adults to access public services, navigate digital systems, interpret information, support family and community life, participate in work, resist manipulation and make their voices heard.

The conference also showed that the European adult basic skills community is facing a double challenge. On the one hand, there is a strong and growing recognition that basic skills matter for the future of Europe. On the other hand, adult learning systems still struggle with underfunding, fragmented provision, insufficient outreach, weak implementation capacity and uneven participation. The Lisbon conference created space to discuss this tension openly and constructively.

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Starting from practice: the Qualifica Centre visit

The pre-conference programme began with a visit to the ***Qualifica Centre of Agrupamento de Escolas de Alvalade, at Escola Secundária Padre António Vieira***. This was more than a study visit. It grounded the conference in a practical and human question: what does an adult learning system look like when it tries to recognise adults' existing competences, understand their goals, and build individual pathways for further learning and qualification?

Participants were introduced to the Portuguese Qualifica approach through both national and local perspectives. Principal Dina Paulino and Education Coordinator Rui Costa presented the development and role of the Qualifica Centre as part of the National Qualifica Programme, while educational professionals of the Centre shared the local practice perspective. The visit included discussion on guidance, recognition, validation and certification of competences, training pathways, digital and literacy competences, and progression opportunities.

One of the strongest messages from the visit was that adult learners do not arrive as "blank slates." They bring work histories, family responsibilities, migration experiences, informal learning, interrupted education, skills acquired in everyday life, and aspirations that are not always visible in formal qualifications. The Qualifica approach therefore raised a central theme for the whole conference: adult learning systems must recognise adults' lives as a starting point, not as an obstacle.

At the same time, the visit also opened a broader European question. How can systems combine recognition with meaningful learning? How can certification avoid becoming a purely administrative process? How can guidance, validation and training be connected in a way that builds real capability, confidence and progression?



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Portuguese perspectives: progress, evidence and unfinished work

The first morning of the main conference placed the Portuguese experience in a wider policy and research context. Contributions from Miguel Silva, Maria do Carmo Gomes described Portugal not as a simple success story, but as a complex case of long-term system development, policy learning and continuing challenges.

Miguel Silva framed the Qualifica Programme as a major national policy response to historically low qualification levels and the need for stronger adult learning pathways. His presentation highlighted the scale of the Portuguese effort, including more than 1.2 million registrations and 1.5 million certifications, and around 300 Qualifica Centres across the country. He also emphasised that basic skills are foundational, not minimal. They enable people to interpret information, assess evidence, make decisions and participate as citizens.

Maria do Carmo Gomes offered a deeper evidence-based reflection on adult literacies and adult learning in Portugal. She stressed that literacies are multimodal and dynamic. They include reading, writing, calculation, digital tools and problem-solving, but they are not static possessions. Unlike diplomas or certificates, skills can develop, decompose and require constant adaptation. Her contribution also reminded participants that Portugal's adult learning reforms must be understood against a longer historical background: late democratisation, persistent low qualification levels, weak social valorisation of education, and separated or discontinuous policy interventions.

A powerful insight emerged from the Portuguese opening: progress in qualification levels does not automatically mean progress in skills. Certification matters, but the more demanding question is what adults are actually able to do with what they know. This distinction between certification and capability became one of the central threads of the conference.

The discussion also raised the importance of institutional stability. Adult learning systems need more than good projects. They need continuity, professional knowledge, funding mechanisms, quality assurance and governance structures that survive political transitions and changing priorities.



***EBSN** © The first morning of the main conference*

The European policy moment: basic skills in the Union of Skills

Klára Perényi, from the European Commission, provided an important European policy framing for the conference. Her contribution situated basic skills within current EU priorities, including the Union of Skills, the Action Plan on Basic Skills, Individual Learning Accounts and the Skills Guarantee.

A key message from the Commission perspective was that basic skills matter more than ever for Europe's future. They are the foundation of lifelong learning, participation and opportunity. Yet participation in adult learning remains highly unequal across Europe, and adults furthest from learning are often least likely to benefit from available opportunities.

Klára also stressed that successful lifelong learning systems must focus not only on access, but on engagement. The existence of learning opportunities does not guarantee participation. Adults need relevance, confidence, guidance, trust and support. This perspective resonated strongly with later conference discussions, especially those on workplace learning, community learning and outreach.

In response to the question of how EBSN could contribute to the Commission's work, Klára encouraged the Network and its members to share evidence, good examples, impact studies, policy analyses and position papers. This gives EBSN a concrete follow-up role: to help collect and communicate relevant knowledge from its members, especially on how to reach adults furthest from learning and how to integrate basic skills into broader lifelong learning strategies.

From evidence to action: strengthening the action chain

One of the most useful conceptual contributions of the conference came from Judith Alamprese, who introduced the idea of the **Action Chain in Adult Basic Skills**. The model connects five essential elements: data, public awareness, policy, implementation capacity and evidence building.

This framework helped clarify why many adult basic skills systems remain weak despite strong evidence. Data alone do not change policy. Public awareness does not automatically produce sustainable funding. Policy commitments do not implement themselves. Good practice does not become system learning unless it is documented, evaluated, connected and used.

The panel discussion following Judy's input brought together Armelle Desabaye-Nourry from ANLCI, Ludwig Willaert from CBE Ligo Brusselleer, and Marie Quiter from Arbeit und Leben Berlin-Brandenburg. Their contributions illustrated different parts of the action chain: national and local data, public understanding, workplace implementation, policy observatories and evidence building.

Several discussions returned to the same point: adult basic skills work is often weakened by gaps between levels. Local practitioners may know what is happening, but their knowledge does not reach policymakers. Researchers may produce evidence, but it may not be translated into implementation. Public narratives may focus on individual motivation, while structural

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barriers remain invisible. The action chain gives EBSN and its members a useful framework for connecting these levels more deliberately.

What practitioners identified as urgent

The pre-conference exchange and moderator notes show that practitioners entered the conference with a clear sense of both opportunity and pressure.

Among the main interests were policy advocacy, workplace upskilling, recognition of skills, professionalisation, digital skills for teachers, multi-stakeholder cooperation, inclusive pathways, innovative learning spaces, and research on basic skills in VET. These interests point to a proactive vision: practitioners are not only asking for more resources; they are also seeking better systems, better evidence, better cooperation and better professional support.

At the same time, the "burning issues" identified by participants were serious. They included decreasing funding, difficulty reaching target groups, the digital divide, the impact of AI, narrow policy definitions of basic skills, democratic resilience, language barriers, career guidance, funding rules that do not fit reality, and a growing gap between learners' skills and labour market requirements.

A recurrent concern was that adult basic skills are often not seen as a sufficient political priority. Provision can be vulnerable to funding cuts, short-term project logic and changing government priorities. Practitioners also highlighted that outreach remains one of the hardest challenges. Adults with basic skills needs may be difficult to reach not because they lack motivation, but because provision is not sufficiently visible, accessible, trusted, relevant or connected to their everyday lives.

Digitalisation, AI and the changing target group

Digital transformation and artificial intelligence appeared throughout the conference as both opportunity and risk.

Jana Wälchli's presentation, **"Easy is not easy enough"**, provided a particularly strong reflection on digital basic competences. Her project examples showed that even learning materials designed to be easy may still be too difficult for adults with limited digital experience. Simplicity requires more than plain language. It also requires intuitive layout, repeated structures, consistent symbols, technical guidance and careful attention to what learners actually see and understand.

Her contribution also challenged assumptions about teachers and tutors. Digital competence among educators is often overestimated. Being able to use a digital tool does not necessarily mean being able to integrate it meaningfully into adult basic skills teaching. Tutors need deeper techno-pedagogical competence: they must understand not only which tools to use, but how these tools support autonomy, subject learning and digital participation.

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The final panel developed this discussion further. Digitalisation and AI are changing not only the tools adults need to use, but also the definition of vulnerability. More people may now need support to navigate information, AI-generated content, online services and digital decision-making. The target group is therefore expanding and changing. It may include younger and more formally educated adults who nevertheless lack the critical digital competences needed for autonomy and participation.

This creates a difficult policy question. If more people need support but resources do not increase, how should systems prioritise? How can they avoid leaving behind those with the deepest needs? How can AI-related competences be integrated into basic skills without narrowing the field to technology alone?

The Lisbon discussions pointed towards shared responsibility. Learners, educators, providers, policymakers, technology developers and funding bodies all have a role. But without clear guidance, professional development, data protection standards and quality criteria, AI may widen rather than reduce inequalities.

Democratic resilience and literacy under pressure

Anke Grotlüschen's keynote gave the conference one of its most urgent political framings. She argued that literacy and language provision are increasingly under pressure from anti-democratic actors and discourses. This pressure is not limited to direct attacks. It works through narratives, delegitimation, funding cuts, hostility towards inclusion, and the shifting of the public debate.

Her presentation showed how literacy, language learning and inclusion can be targeted through apparently neutral terms such as "freedom of speech", "neutrality" or "voter's will", while anti-democratic discourses move the boundaries of what becomes politically acceptable. The implications for adult learning are serious. Provision for migrants, literacy learners, disabled adults, adults receiving social benefits and other groups can become vulnerable to public hostility and political cuts.

The conference therefore connected basic skills to democratic resilience in a very concrete way. Literacy is not only about decoding texts. It is about participating in society, understanding institutions, resisting manipulation, accessing rights and defending democratic values. When adult basic skills provision is weakened, democratic participation is weakened too.

Participants also discussed counterstrategies: professionalisation, strong mission statements, networks and alliances, quality management, organisational courage, and the refusal to adopt extremist terminology uncritically. These reflections broadened the conference theme significantly. Basic skills for democratic participation are not only competences for learners; they also require resilient institutions and professionals.

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***EBSN** © Piotr Sadowski, Vice-President of the Lifelong Learning Platform*

Lifelong learning systems: inclusion, participation and advocacy

Piotr Sadowski, Vice-President of the Lifelong Learning Platform, brought a wider civil society and lifelong learning perspective. He reminded participants of the holistic vision of lifelong learning associated with Jacques Delors: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be.

His contribution also highlighted a tension in current European debates. Skills are now high on the EU agenda, but there is a risk that education and training are increasingly instrumentalised for competitiveness and labour market needs. Adult education has historically been associated with employment policy at EU level, and current skills debates may reinforce this tendency.

Piotr's message was not that employability is unimportant. Rather, he argued that lifelong learning must remain connected to personal fulfilment, social cohesion, citizenship and democratic life. This resonated strongly with the conference's theme. Basic skills matter for work, but they also matter for life and participation.

The advocacy priorities presented by LLLP — funding, adult learning definitions, key competences, citizenship education, flexible pathways, community lifelong learning centres, lifelong guidance and paid training leave — gave EBSN a useful reference point for future cooperation. They also underlined that basic skills advocacy needs alliances with wider lifelong learning organisations.

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Workplace basic skills: from access to activation

Several contributions showed that the workplace is a crucial, but complex, setting for adult basic skills.

Alda Bernardes' presentation from El Corte Inglés Portugal was one of the clearest examples of how basic skills can be embedded in company strategy. Her central message was that access is not enough. Participation must be actively created.

The retail context is fast, demanding and people-centred, but not naturally learning-friendly. Shift work, operational pressure, high turnover, short-term priorities and limited time all make learning difficult. Even when learning opportunities exist, those who need them most may not access them.

Alda's contribution reframed proximity as an access strategy. Relationship comes before content. Trust creates engagement. Participation enables learning. In practice, this means direct invitations, personalised messages, informal conversations, follow-up, manager involvement, application support, guidance and mediation with schools. The message was simple but powerful: if people do not come to learning, learning must go to them.

Marie Quiter's presentation on the Come2Care project offered another workplace-related model, this time in the care sector. It connected basic skills, language learning, migration, labour shortages and workplace integration. The project responds to the major care workforce challenges facing Germany and Europe, including demographic change and staff shortages. It supports newly arrived international nurses, nursing assistants and care workers, but also existing staff, HR and integration managers, and teachers.

Come2Care combines work-oriented language and basic skills training, welcoming workshops, online onboarding training and AI-based learning nuggets. Its success factors include building sustainable networks, connecting healthcare organisations with education providers, close collaboration between teachers and workplace supervisors, and attention to framework conditions within both education and healthcare organisations.

Together, these workplace examples showed that basic skills are not only an education issue. They are also an organisational, labour market and inclusion issue. Employers can be important partners, but workplace provision requires mediation, trust, guidance and pedagogical expertise. Training alone is not enough.

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From local innovation to system-level learning

A recurrent theme in the conference was the abundance of local innovation and the weakness of mechanisms for transferability and system learning.

Daniela Ermini's session on **"From Fragmented Practices to Scalable Impact"** addressed this directly. She argued that Europe does not lack good practices. The problem is what happens after innovation is created. Practices often remain local, project-based, under-documented, insufficiently connected to policy and difficult to adapt elsewhere.

EPALE was presented as a potential European learning infrastructure: not simply a website or repository, but a space that can make practices visible, support exchange, reveal emerging themes and connect adult learning communities across countries. But visibility is not the same as transferability.



***EBSN** © Daniela Ermini's session on "From Fragmented Practices to Scalable Impact"*

The proposed "transferability lens" is highly relevant for EBSN. When sharing a practice, we need to ask: What problem does it solve? For whom? In what context? What are the essential ingredients? What evidence or feedback exists? What can travel? What needs local adaptation?

This insight should inform how EBSN shares conference outputs and member examples in the future. The aim should not be to present good practices as models to copy. It should be to help members understand what can be adapted, under which conditions, and with what support.

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Inclusion, participation and community learning

The conference also gave strong attention to community-based and low-threshold learning environments.

Sessions on ageing, political deliberation, forced migrant communities, community learning, hidden curriculum and grassroots professional communities all showed that basic skills are developed not only in formal classrooms, but also through participation, relationships and everyday contexts.

The contribution on older adults and literacy in Portugal raised a particularly important issue: older adults are often invisible in data and policy. If adults over 65 are excluded from major skills assessments, their learning needs can also become invisible to policy. Yet literacy, participation and dignity do not cease to matter at retirement age.

The discussions also showed the importance of community learning spaces, libraries, local centres, grassroots professional networks and informal learning opportunities. These spaces can reduce stigma, build trust and connect learning to real life. They are especially important for adults who may associate formal education with failure, shame or exclusion.

A key message emerged: participation is learned through participation. Basic skills development is not only about teaching content. It is also about creating environments where adults can speak, decide, experiment, make mistakes, cooperate and experience themselves as capable actors.

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What Lisbon tells us about the future of adult basic skills

Several strong messages emerged across the three days.

First, basic skills must be understood as democratic infrastructure. They support work and employability, but also autonomy, public service access, family life, community engagement, information literacy and democratic participation.

Second, the target group is changing. Digitalisation, AI, migration, ageing, labour market change and disinformation are reshaping who needs support and what kinds of support are needed.

Third, participation barriers are structural. Adults do not simply fail to participate because they lack motivation. They may face time constraints, low confidence, stigma, poor guidance, inaccessible provision, unclear relevance, financial barriers, digital exclusion or negative prior educational experiences.

Fourth, implementation capacity matters. Europe has policy frameworks, projects and examples, but adult basic skills systems need stable funding, professional development, guidance structures, data, quality assurance and institutional continuity.

Fifth, educators are central. Digital tools, AI, workplace learning and critical thinking approaches all depend on teachers, tutors, trainers and facilitators who are professionally supported and able to work with adults' real needs.

Sixth, good practices must become usable knowledge. EBSN has an important role in helping members document, interpret and share examples in ways that support adaptation and policy learning.

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EBSN follow-up actions

The Lisbon conference should not end with a report. It should become the basis for continued action by EBSN and its members.

1. Publish and disseminate the conference report

EBSN will use this report as a basis for communication with conference participants, members, partners, European Commission colleagues and interested stakeholders. Key messages will also be developed into newsletter items, blogposts and social media content.

2. Share presentations and resources

EBSN will create a more structured space on its website for conference materials, presentations, resources and follow-up outputs. This should support participants who wish to revisit the discussions and help non-participants discover the value of the conference.

3. Develop thematic follow-up articles

Several conference themes deserve further reflection. Possible follow-up articles include:

- Basic skills as democratic infrastructure
- From evidence to action: strengthening the adult basic skills action chain
- Digital inclusion, AI and the changing target group
- Community learning and low-threshold access
- Workplace basic skills and employer engagement
- From good practice to transferable learning

4. Continue dialogue with the European Commission

In response to the Commission's interest, EBSN will collect relevant examples, impact studies, analyses, policy papers and good practices from members. These can support ongoing European policy discussions linked to the Union of Skills, the Action Plan on Basic Skills, Individual Learning Accounts and future EU programmes.

5. Strengthen member exchange

EBSN will use formats such as EBSN Cafés, webinars and targeted member exchanges to follow up on themes that emerged strongly in Lisbon, including AI and basic skills, community learning spaces, workplace basic skills, data and observatories, and outreach to adults furthest from learning.

6. Prepare Hamburg 2027 strategically

The next EBSN Annual Conference will take place in Hamburg, Germany, on 12–14 May 2027, in cooperation with the University of Hamburg. The Lisbon report will support early communication and outreach, showing why the EBSN conference is a valuable European space for policy dialogue, professional exchange and collaboration on adult basic skills.

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A conversation worth continuing

The Lisbon conference showed a European adult basic skills community that is thoughtful, committed and realistic. Participants did not hide the difficulties: funding cuts, fragmented systems, low political priority, digital divides, outreach barriers and democratic pressures were all discussed openly. But the conference also showed the strength of the field: practical knowledge, research evidence, policy engagement, creativity, solidarity and a shared belief that adult learning matters.

The central message from Lisbon is: basic skills are not only about what adults lack. They are about what people need in order to live, work, decide, belong and participate. They are not marginal to Europe's future; they are one of its foundations.

The work now is to connect the evidence, the practice, the policy and the people. That is the task of EBSN as a network — and an invitation to all organisations that want to be part of the next stage of European cooperation on adult basic skills.


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