

POLICY BRIEF

Basic digital skills for adults in the Nordic countries



Nordic Network for
Adult Learning

Background



Network for Basic Skills
for Adult Learning

This policy brief presents the results of the work conducted by the Network for Basic Skills for Adults, which is part of NVL (Nordic Network for Adult Learning). The network has published a report in January 2020 **Basic digital skills for adults in the Nordic countries – how can we turn challenges to opportunities?**, which provides an overview of the situation in the Nordic countries regarding basic digital skills and recommendations based on this overview and comparative analysis.

The first initiative for a network in the field of basic skills for adults was taken in 2015 during the Danish

Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. The intention was that a network would follow up the work on basic skills in the Nordic countries based on the results of the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).

Another important starting point for the Network was the European Agenda for Adult Learning 2015–2020 and the EU Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: “New Opportunities for Adults”, which was launched in 2016. One of the prioritized goals in the EU agenda

is to emphasize the importance of significantly increasing the supply and number of participants in Adult Learning, including the use of information and communication technology (ICT) tools for adults.

The focus on digitalization is in line with the Nordic Council of Ministers policy, which in 2017 established an ad hoc Nordic Council of Ministers for Digitalisation. Among many objectives, one is to develop a cohesive digital infrastructure for the region's citizens, businesses and administrations.



What can be done at Nordic level?

The network's report points out that despite the fact that the Nordic countries have made notable progress in the area of basic skills, a significant number of adults still lack the basic skills, including basic digital skills, in order to be able to take an active part in society and to make a living. This policy brief highlights a number of the challenges mentioned in the report that are similar across the Nordic countries in regard to basic digital skills, and therefore relevant to deal with collaboratively at a Nordic level.

On the basis of the analysis of basic digital skills in the Nordic countries and the results of the report it is recommended to:

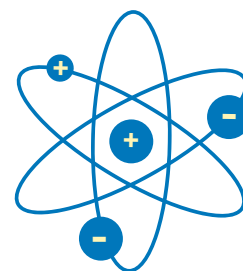
○ Renew all efforts to bridge the digital divide and promote digital inclusion

The increasingly rapid pace of digital development is transforming our work, society, and our everyday lives in many ways. Although this transformation offers many possibilities, it also possesses a serious risk of marginalization for groups of people who lack the basic digital skills needed to profit from digital innovation. Increasing the basic digital skills of the population is crucial in order to bridge the digital divide and promote digital inclusion in every aspect of life.

○ Increase efforts to create and maintain a lifelong learning system

National lifelong learning systems must increase their flexibility to be able to adapt quickly to digital changes and to the opportunities and challenges these changes can create. The systems should take into account the wide disparity in the population's digital skills levels and be able to provide adequate training for each individual.

Challenges across the Nordic countries



Inequality in basic digital skills levels

According to PIAAC, Finland ranked second both in proficiency in literacy and numeracy and third in proficiency in problem solving in technology-rich environments (PSTRE). At the same time, it was noted that Finland has a large group of adults aged 16–65 with zero to low levels of PSTRE skills.

Digital skills scores are lowest among adults aged 55–65. In the older age groups, which fall outside the PIAAC survey, a large percentage of individuals do not use the internet at all. At the same time, more public and private services are being digitalized. Identification of individuals with weak basic skills and outreach to this group remain challenging tasks for the future.

Difficulties reaching and motivating groups with weak digital skills.

Reaching people with weak digital skills has proven a major challenge, one of the reasons being that they are often not aware of the need to strengthen their skills. People in this group tend to use fewer learning strategies than people with stronger digital skills. The strategies used to learn digital skills are complex and require the individual to have a high level of other basic skills (literacy and numeracy). Norway has worked with training measures adapted to the weak groups, which require more learning strategies.

Those with low skills are usually not participating in work or education.

Increasing digitalization and rapid technological development continue to raise the demands made on individual digital competencies in everyday life, in society and at work. In all of the Nordic countries there are sizable differences in skill levels within the population. E.g. the report results show that Norway's population has good digital skills compared to other countries, according to PIAAC, but there are significant differences in levels within the population. The groups with weak basic digital skills largely coincide with the groups that are outside the workforce or are at risk of being excluded from it. People with weak digital skills also tend to have weaker literacy and numeracy skills.

Sweden scored above average in the PIAAC survey, but it is also the country with the greatest differences between low and high performance. In the Swedish population there are differences in skills between people with more and less education and differences in skills between people born in Sweden and born abroad.

The complexity of digitalization can lead to digital exclusion.

In 2018, the United Nations stated that Denmark is world's leading in providing government services and information through the internet. Nevertheless, the PIAAC study showed that more than 1 million Danish adults have difficulties carrying out everyday tasks on a computer.

The groups with weak basic digital skills largely coincide with those outside the workforce or are at risk of dropping out of the workforce. In the Nordic societies, people with less formal education, elderly people, the unemployed, immigrants and employees not participating in continuing education are at risk of digital exclusion.



More information about
the Nordic Cooperation on digitalisation

Call for continued actions

The report **Basic digital skills for adults in the Nordic countries** points out several tracks of development work, which are essential in order to make the digital services really accessible to all adult target groups in the Nordic region. Further education and training for adults of all ages and at all stages of life is a precondition for safe and ethically responsible use of modern technologies.

Continued support from the Nordic Council of Ministers is essential for continuous exchange of experience in the Nordic region in order to help the countries and adult education providers to find innovative ways of reaching the most vulnerable groups, help them to cope with the pace of development and ensure that the digital development does not outpace the education and training.

