

New Deal for Communities

The National Evaluation

Research Reports

Skills for Employability: Early Findings

Research Report 6

The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit is currently sponsoring the 2002-2005 national evaluation of New Deal for Communities. This evaluation is being undertaken by a consortium of organisations co-ordinated by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

Those wishing to know more about the evaluation should consult the evaluation's web site in the first instance
<http://ndcevaluation.adc.shu.ac.uk/ndcevaluation/home.asp>



Sheffield Hallam University

**Skills for Employability:
Early Findings**

Research Report 6

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary i

1 Introduction..... 1

2 Context and Problem 1

3 Nature of the Intervention 2

4 Delivery 4

5 Outcomes and Impact 7

6 What Works and Lessons 8

7 Conclusions 10

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Skills for employability projects have been established in a number of New Deal for Communities (NDC) areas as part of the worklessness theme of the programme. This overview of skills for employability is based on case study visits to three NDC areas where such projects are in progress.

Skills for employability projects have been defined as initiatives that address the needs of adults with poor literacy and numeracy, improve employability skills and build relevant vocational skills required in the local labour market to help people onto the first rung of employment.

The research to date has identified a number of key attributes of effective skills for employability projects:

- **Attracting clients**

- Outreach work represents a key intervention in attracting clients onto skills for employability courses.
- Embedding basic skills in other courses such as skills for life or employability is proving to be successful.
- Outreach work undertaken by residents and local well-known organisations is proving to be very effective.
- Using non-traditional venues to attract learners who would otherwise not engage in learning assists in making learning more accessible.

- **Working with Clients**

- In areas where residents have traditionally not engaged in learning; new and innovative approaches to engaging with resident is needed.
- It is important that a system of support is in place to assist learners throughout the duration of the course; help in the form of learning advisers, mentors and buddies is vital.
- Local resident involvement in partnerships and in the design and content of courses is necessary to ensure that training is tailored to local needs.

- **Partnership and networking**

- To ensure the sustainability and eventual mainstreaming of projects it is crucial that partners are involved in the delivery of training.
- Establishing partnerships is a time-consuming activity; considerable effort is required to change attitudes and organisational culture and practices.
- Funding partners must accept lower participation rates on basic skills courses and acknowledge that vast paperwork requirements serves only to hinder participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Skills for employability projects have been established in a number of New Deal for Communities (NDC) areas as part of the worklessness theme of the programme. Skills for employability projects have been defined as initiatives that address the needs of adults with poor literacy and numeracy, improve employability skills and build relevant vocational skills required in the local labour market to help people onto the first rung of employment. This overview of skills for employability is based on case study visits to three NDC areas where such projects are in progress. These are:

- Southwark (Aylesbury) – Learn Easy Project
- Manchester (Beswick and Openshaw) – Skills for Life project
- Derby (Derwent) - Valuing Experience in the Community and Workplace project

Whilst the projects have been established for various lengths of time, all are in the relatively early stages of development and findings from the research at this stage should be treated as provisional.

The report covers the following areas:

- The context in which skills for employability projects have been established and the nature of the problem that they are trying to address;
- The nature of the intervention in terms of the projects' objectives;
- The way in which the projects have been delivered, in particular, focusing on the different types of intervention that are offered and the assumptions behind these interventions;
- Current outcomes and impact of the projects (although these are, inevitably, somewhat limited given that the projects are in the relatively early stages of development.
- The key lessons that have been learnt so far from such interventions.

2. CONTEXT AND PROBLEM

The need for significant proportions of the population to improve their basic skills in order to create the knowledge driven economy, from an economic perspective, and fight against social exclusion, from a social perspective, has become fundamental. The establishment of the Basic Skills Agency and the publication of the Moser report in 1999 have led to basic skills becoming one of the focal points of the lifelong learning agenda. Several studies have been published which explore the links between poor basic skills and crime, unemployment, social and financial exclusion¹.

Local market context

The labour market contexts for the case study areas while sharing many similarities do display significant variations. The socioeconomic conditions of the case study areas is important as it has help shape the nature of basic skills provision and models of delivery. All areas share the following characteristics:

- High levels of unemployment and long-term unemployment
- A high proportion of economically inactive residents

¹ Research reports on Basic Skills are available on the Basic Skills Agency website.

- A significant percentage of residents with low levels of numeracy and literacy (approximately 40-45 per cent based on Basic Skills Agency estimates)
- Overall a low level of school achievement and qualification attainment levels
- At present limited job opportunities in the local area combined with a reluctance and/or inability of local residents to travel considerable distances to work.
- Structural changes in the economy with the transition from manufacturing towards retail and service sector based employment.

In addition, Southwark and Manchester are also faced with:

- A high proportion of residents living in social housing (60 per cent in Manchester and up to 90 per cent in Southwark).
- Growing proportions of residents are from Black and ethnic minority groups (BME), and many are asylum seekers and refugees.
- A high propensity for English to be a second or third language amongst the BME population.
- A transient population with significant proportion of local residents residing in the locality for only a short duration of time.

The combined effect of these conditions has meant that the potential demand for basic and key skills provision in each of the case study areas is considerable. The demand for basic skills training is most acute in the New East Manchester area where approximately 8280 residents (aged over 16) are thought to have poor literacy and 9660 residents have poor numeracy skills in the Beswick and Clayton area. In the Derby NDC area some 2500 have been identified as having poor basic skills. However, in each area simply enhancing the existing local capacity of learning providers, while being a vital and formidable task, was deemed inadequate.

Many residents in the case study areas are facing multiple levels of deprivation and social exclusion. Key concerns such as family commitments and the need for child-care facilities, lack of public and private transport, emigration and housing issues represent fundamental barriers for individuals in participating in learning. In supporting the delivery of basic skills courses each area has therefore had to develop an understanding of the local context, an appreciation for the needs of local residents and address the key barriers to learning which affect their areas.

3. NATURE OF THE INTERVENTION

Different approaches to the provision of key and basic skills courses have been developed and implemented within each area and reflect traditional and non-traditional methods. The approach adopted in Southwark is perhaps the most traditional of the case study areas. The Learn Easy project supported by the NDC is delivered jointly by a local community organisation (Cambridge House and Talbot) and Southwark college. The college developed the course and provides the tutors while the community organisation provides some venues and vital knowledge of the local community. Clients enrol on courses in the standard way and attend the classes at Aylesbury Learning Centre and at Southwark College. In contrast, both Derby and Manchester have sought to develop partnerships as a means of changing attitudes towards basic skills and enhancing local capacity.

The NDC in Derby has established the Lifelong Learning and Young People partnership. The partnership is composed of local residents, learning providers, local organisations and agencies with an interest in promoting learning. The role of local residents in this

partnership is believed to be crucial as it ensures training is tailored to the needs and interests of clients. Engaging local residents in learning and raising awareness of the need to improve basic skills represents an immediate and essential task. The principle of embedding basic skills into other more topical courses represents the chosen method of delivery. Clients sign up for courses such as self-protection, which incorporate basic skills training but this is not made explicit. It is considered important that training takes place as close as possible to where people live and where possible in non-traditional settings. Training venues can therefore include community halls, hired rooms in various buildings and sport centres. Several reasons underpin the rationale for this delivery approach. Firstly, it is based on the understanding that individuals often do not recognize a need to improve basic skills. Secondly, the stigma that surrounds basic skills discourages individuals from pursuing training and finally many individuals are simply unaware of the provision available and would not wish to attend a formal institution such as a university or college.

The Skills for Life Strategy implemented in Manchester is supported by numerous funding streams and covers the whole of the New East Manchester, in which the NDC area forms a part. The NDC while operating within the partnership approach does deliver basic skills courses directly. The key reasons for this is the desire to offer flexible and innovative training solutions tailored to the needs of individuals and an inability to recruit sufficient numbers of basic skills tutors, due to the increasing level of demand nationally. The approach implemented in Manchester is multifaceted. The provision of pre-recruitment / employment training represents a key aspect of the Skills for Life programme. The project, closely linked to the work undertaken by the regeneration team, seeks to ensure that local residents are able to access job opportunities that are created in the neighbourhood. Individuals wishing to submit job applications for relocating and new firms are vetted for suitability, which includes basic skills, if needed individuals are offered training.

Enhancing local provision and capacity building represents a second aspect of the NDCs' approach and involves developing a team of literacy and numeracy awareness trainers in other local organisations. Employees of organisations such as Connexions, Groundwork, Step Ahead and large businesses are offered training in how to identify and assist new recruits, employees or clients with basic skills needs. The rationale for this is that other providers have access and expertise in working with groups that are considered to be 'hard to reach' or are not engaged in with the educational agenda. Learning providers have to find new ways of engaging with learners and should provide assistance where clients are located rather than expecting individuals to attend designated learning venues. It is felt that a more holistic approach has to be developed regarding basic skills. Delivering basic skills training and raising awareness should be undertaken as part of a wider remit of employment and social development.

Despite the differences in approaches to delivering skills for employability projects some similarities can be identified. All case study areas actively avoided labelling or using the term 'basic skills' in publicity or course material. The extent of the stigma that surrounds basic skills is such that providers have sought to address the issue by incorporating basic skills into other courses. Clients attend courses believing they are gaining skills for employment or for personal and social development reasons. In providing courses each area recognised the need to provide additional support in the form of learning mentors, advisors and pastoral care. Projects with the exception of Southwark were not developed or managed in isolation from other NDC activities and themes. Links with business development activities were perceived to be of paramount importance. Each project then offered a series of additional interventions to ensure that individuals once enrolled completed courses and gained relevant qualifications.

Aims and objectives

All projects have targets relating to the number of participants on courses, qualifications obtained, training weeks and specific targets relating to equal opportunities. However, Derby and Manchester both have wider aims and objectives that relate to partnership involvement, developing a coordinated approach to delivery of basic skills courses, raising awareness and local capacity building.

The following is indicative of the range of aims and objectives in each area:

Derby

- Raise awareness of the need for basic skills training (demand and supply)
- Find new ways to engage residents in learning
- Reduce the number of adults with low or poor levels of literacy and numeracy
- Improve self-esteem

Southwark

- Address basic skills needs (literacy, numeracy and communication)
- Provide ESOL classes and enable local residents to gain qualifications

Manchester

- Establish a coordinated approach to the development of literacy and numeracy skills provision
- Increase the amount, quality, diversity and accessibility of provision
- Develop and deliver training for staff in appropriate organisations in basic skills awareness

Beneficiaries

In the broadest terms, the skills for employability projects serve the local community and as such attempt to attract all local residents with basic skills needs. Courses are provided for those in employment as well as the unemployed; indeed, more emphasis is now being placed upon work-based learning. Whilst neither Southwark nor Derby explicitly identified target groups, the majority of participants in Southwark were members of ethnic minority groups, in particular, refugees and asylum seekers. Manchester, in contrast, deliberately sought to target 'hard to reach' groups including: young people, the long term unemployed, asylum seekers and refugees, drug users and the homeless. However, it was generally acknowledged, in all case study areas, that current provision was 'a drop in the ocean' relative to the extent of local need.

4. DELIVERY

Although the approach to the provision of skills for employability differs across the NDC areas, there are certain elements of delivery that remain common to all projects. These are outlined below.

Attracting clients

Attracting clients represents a crucial intervention in the delivery of key and basic skills courses. In Derby and Manchester attracting clients demands significant investments in terms of personnel and resources to be made, in contrast to Southwark where individuals (asylum seekers and refugees) are more likely to recognise a need to learn or improve their English. Outreach work has become a fundamental part of the process

and is vital in order to raise awareness of the need to improve skills and change cultural perceptions.

A common approach has been implemented within the case study areas. The NDCs either directly employ or make use of partner organisations' outreach workers. The different terminology employed does in fact convey the diverse role the outreach worker has in each area. For example in Derby outreach workers are referred to as Learning Advisors and are involved in attracting clients onto courses and staying with that client through to completion or the attainment of goals, outlined in the individual's learning plan. It is considered important that learning advisers are local people and where possible share common life experiences with clients. In Manchester outreach work, when it has been fully implemented, will be divided into two distinct areas; outreach workers will be employed to raise awareness of courses and provide assistance at the early stages. However, once clients have enrolled on a course learning mentors / buddies, due to be recruited shortly, will be assigned to individuals who can offer assistance and support throughout the duration of the course. This dual approach is emblematic of the approach adopted in Southwark. The learning providers make use of NDC outreach workers to raise awareness and signpost individuals to the college where upon enrolment tutors take over and provide pastoral support throughout the course.

All of the case study areas stress the importance of understanding the local community and employing workers that can quickly gain the trust and confidence of clients. Evidence of this is provided from Southwark. The NDC initially employed an external organisation (based in Putney just outside the NDC area) to provide an outreach service. The organisation had previously undertaken this type of work with great success. It was however unable to penetrate local networks because they were unknown to them; neither was the organisation sufficiently known by local people in order to gain the necessary confidences and relationships. The decision to employ a local community organisation (Cambridge House and Talbot) which has a long history of undertaking voluntary work in the community has proved very successful.

Whilst community workers and learning advisers form a major part of the outreach activity, all case study areas also made use of publicity material and promotional events to attract new clients. Leaflets translated into the main minority languages have been distributed, often on a door to door basis. Posters are displayed in prominent positions such as sport centres, community halls, libraries etc. Outreach workers make use of local events or NDC celebration days to use display boards to advertise their services. Performance arts are also viewed as a salient means of attracting potential clients to a particular venue where outreach workers would make the most of the opportunity. It was generally acknowledged that outreach work is time-consuming and costly; however, the ability to attract clients would be seriously compromised without it.

Working with clients

Once again the procedures for working with clients are similar in each case study area. However, the extent to which procedures are rigorously followed and the level of formality attached differs. Southwark provides an example of an approach that most embodies formality, in line with the college status. The approach to working with clients follows traditional lines; it involves an induction meeting, the creation of a learning plan, a mid term review and an ex post evaluation. In addition tutors are expected throughout the duration of the course to hold regular tutorials with clients to assess progress and discuss key issues or concerns.

Each stage of the process has been designed to communicate and engage with clients; as a result individual tutors are able to marry the goals of the individual with the

requirements of the course. The induction process outlines the objectives and content of course, details timings and the commitments and the college's policies regarding equal opportunities. The creation of a learning plan enables the individual to record and chart progress against the goals they have identified and are most pertinent. It identifies the learner's needs, barriers to learning, expectations and ultimate goals. The review process takes place at intermediate stages and identifies progress and next steps.

Tutorial time is used on a less formal basis and gives learners the opportunity to discuss any issues with their tutors, learning-related or otherwise. Tutorial time is perceived to be a crucial element of the support the college provides and is understood to be a key reason as to why the course has a relatively low drop out rate. Many learners' face multiple barriers to learning which if not addressed would lead to them having to withdraw from courses. The advantage of holding some lessons in Cambridge House is that learners can be signposted and access other community services that are available within the building. These include general legal advice and specific advice relating to immigration issues, housing services, childcare facilities, advice on benefits and, most importantly, counselling.

In Derby the development of a learning plan forms the central component of the approach to working with clients. Learning plans are devised at the outset and are closely monitored by the client and learning advisers. The role of the learning adviser encompasses both the pastoral care elements as demonstrated in Southwark (signposting, help and advice) and the tutorial role in setting deadlines and ensuring work is completed. Above all the learning adviser attempts to build a relationship with each client and in so doing understand the individual's circumstances and needs.

In Manchester the work with clients has three aspects. First, it involves working with local organisations to raise awareness and build capacity, to enable them to respond to basic skills needs within their own organisations. This is done through training adult literacy and numeracy trainers who are employees of other organisations committed to addressing this issue. Ongoing support is provided through the provision of continuing professional development training. The second aspect of working with clients relates to individuals receiving training in connection with employment opportunities or bespoke training courses. Learning needs are assessed during the screening process and courses are devised with these needs in mind. Finally, the main thrust of the approach in Manchester is to respond to local need in a flexible and innovative manner. Individuals can receive training at home or in other appropriate places; courses are run at convenient times for learners and are not prescribed in any way.

There is a clear rational and / or evidence base behind each of these interventions. In the case study areas (Manchester and Derby) where more innovative solutions to delivering training are being pioneered, the rational is based upon a clear understanding that existing methods for encouraging the take up of basic skills courses in their respective areas is not working. The high proportion of those in need of basic skills training compared to those participating in learning is testament to this fact. Both areas have commissioned surveys and research work to be undertaken concerning how residents would like to access training and in what areas. The approach in both case study areas is experimental and courses are being piloted to determine the extent to which the approach should be mainstreamed. With regards to the approach to working with clients adopted in Southwark, this is based on a well-tried and tested method that has been implemented by the college for many years. The low drop out rate demonstrates the success of this approach in this context.

Partnership and networking

The role of partners and the extent of networking differed in each case study area. In Southwark the partnership was limited to a few organisations: the NDC and SRB provide the funding; Southwark College and Cambridge House and Talbot deliver the training; while NDC community development workers carry out a large proportion of the outreach work. The input from the NDC is limited to ensuring that targets are met and this is monitored through the production of quarterly returns.

In contrast, partnerships play a much bigger role in both Derby and Manchester and have had a demonstrable impact upon the progress of the projects and their effectiveness. Derby NDC does not deliver any training; rather its goals are to bend mainstream provision to the needs of the local community. As such, the success of courses that have been delivered to date demonstrate the effectiveness of the partnership. Key partners include: Derby University, Learning and Skills Council East Midlands, Adult Learning Centre, the local authority, Jobcentre plus and Connexions.

More than 30 organisations have signed up to the Skills for Life action plan in Manchester. The partnership is composed of a wide range of bodies representing learning providers, local organisations and related public sector agencies. Whilst the NDC perceives its role within the partnership to be a coordinator and facilitator, it has also taken on a delivery role. The stated reasons for this are a desire to provide new and innovative solutions to delivering training and the dearth of basic skills tutors at present. Developing the partnership has been time consuming and progress on the ground has reportedly been slow as a result. New systems have had to be created and accreditation obtained for courses. However, it is hoped that the new ways of delivering training will be mainstreamed in the future.

The benefits of partnership working, as clearly demonstrated in the Southwark and Derby case studies, is that it allows organisations to concentrate on those activities and services they can best deliver and avoids duplication in terms of creating new systems. The necessary systems and procedures are already in place and enable the swift implementation of projects. In addition, it has an immediate effect with regard to mainstreaming activity as the individual organisation is compelled to try out new methods of learning and is supported throughout the process.

5. OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Whilst the projects have been established for varying lengths of time they are still in the early stages of delivery. A great deal of effort has gone into establishing partnerships and getting key organisations on board, recruiting staff to develop and implement the projects and carry out outreach work. Course materials have been produced and the necessary accreditation obtained and, of course, all this must take place prior to attracting clients and running courses. It was generally acknowledged that there is a significant lead in time when developing basic skills course, particularly, as success depends on engaging the local community. In addition, a significant proportion of the work undertaken is intangible as it relates to changing current practices, attitudes and organisational cultures.

Despite this, all projects have recorded outputs and some positive outcomes. In Southwark, the targets for the number of learners, qualifications obtained, training weeks and other key targets have been achieved during 2000/1 and 2001/2. The following gives an indication of the progress that was made during 2001/2:

- 29 learners obtained ESOL qualifications,
- 27 people gained qualifications in IT,
- 12 people gained qualifications in Basic Skills,
- 710 training weeks were delivered, and
- 6 childcare places were made available.

In Manchester progress has been made in running courses for literacy and numeracy awareness trainers, with 22 people attending from various organisations. The Skills for Employment training course has been delivered twice, attended by over 40 people. A series of bespoke courses, 6 in total, have been delivered tailored to needs of local residents. As a result:

- 43 learners have obtained qualifications;
- 47 training weeks have been completed.

Progress in Derby has been made in terms of establishing the partnership, employing and accrediting 16 learning advisors, and delivering 3 ESOL classes and 6 basic skills groups. In addition a self-protection course for women (which embeds basic skills) has been delivered twice, a total of 12 residents participated.

6. WHAT WORKS AND LESSONS

The case study areas provide in essence three different approaches to delivering skills for employability courses. The approaches differ as a result of the socioeconomic contexts in which the NDCs are operating. A number of critical factors can be identified that have led to these slight variations:

- The general composition and mobility of the local population;
- The extent to which local residents perceive a need for learning;
- Access to employment opportunities;
- The extent to which partnerships are inclusive and cohesive;
- The level of current awareness regarding basic skills and the degree of participation;
- The key barriers to participation in learning.

In areas where the population is relatively stable and have traditionally not accessed learning, new methods of engagement and participation are necessary. Equally, residents are more willing to participate in training in areas that are characterised by a high proportion of refugees and asylum seekers who are not able to fully function without acquiring or improving basic skills. Finally, tailoring training to localised job opportunities provides an effective method for engaging with and raising the attainment levels of local residents.

Across the three case study areas, it is apparent that certain elements of the project are considered to be essential in order to deliver the most effective service. Whilst all of these elements may be delivered in different ways the principles remain the same and can be identified as the key drivers of change.

- **Attracting clients**

- Outreach work represents a key intervention in attracting clients onto skills for employability courses.
- Face to face outreach has proved to be very effective. A key lesson must therefore be to incorporate face to face work as a vital part of publicity and communication strategies.
- Outreach work when undertaken by residents and local well-known organisations has proved very effective.
- It is important to build meaningful relationships with the local community and gain confidences when carrying out outreach work.
- Labelling courses as 'Basic Skills' can actively discourage participation and may stigmatise participants.
- Embedding basic skills in other courses such as skills for life or employability is proving to be successful.
- The development of a more holistic approach to the provision of basic skills, which incorporates the wider needs and interests of learners, represents a key lesson.
- Using non-traditional venues to attract learners who would otherwise not engage in learning may assist in making learning more accessible.
- Holding training sessions in multifunctional and purpose buildings not only inadvertently attracts clients but can also assist in the signposting of and access to other key services.
- The provision of crèche facilities is crucial and overcomes a key barrier to participating in learning for many key target groups (single parents and women).
- Individuals are more likely to engage in learning if it is related to a tangible output such as enhanced job opportunities. A key lesson is therefore to facilitate greater links and synergy between lifelong learning and business development themes.
- Engaging with 'hard to reach' groups can be achieved by undertaking capacity building work with those organisations and groups with whom they come into direct contact. For example community and voluntary sector organisations such as: Shelter, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Big Issue Foundation, Barnardos etc.

- **Working with Clients**

- The implementation of traditional or modern approaches to learning must be based on a detailed understanding of the local context, relate to the needs of local residents and address the key barriers to learning in the local area.
- In areas where residents have traditionally not engaged in learning; new and innovative approaches to engaging residents may be needed.
- It is important that a system of support is in place to assist learners throughout the duration of the course; help in the form of learning advisers, mentors and buddies is vital. For courses that follow a more traditional approach class tutors can provide personalised support.
- Local resident involvement in partnerships and in the design and content of courses is necessary to ensure that training is tailored to local needs.
- It is essential when dealing with vulnerable and 'hard to reach' groups that additional support is available in the form of counselling, legal advice, child support etc.
- There is a need to address the basic skills needs of those in employment through the provision of work-based learning.
- Courses need to be flexible and responsive to local residents needs.
- There is a need to embrace a more holistic approach when delivering skills for employability courses such as signposting to other key services.

- **Partnership and networking**

- To ensure the sustainability and eventual mainstreaming of projects it is crucial that partners are involved in the delivery of training.
- Establishing partnerships is a time-consuming activity; considerable effort is required to change attitudes and organisation culture and practices.
- The formation of a partnership could therefore be included as a legitimate objective and target for the project.
- In addition to the project partnership it is important that links are made with other wider groups in order to ensure referrals and effective signposting can take place.
- Funding partners must learn to accept lower participation rates on basic skill type courses and acknowledge that vast paperwork requirements on the part of the individual learner is disconcerting and serves only to hinder participation.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This overview of the skills for employability projects has raised a number of issues that other NDC areas developing such projects may need to be aware of and address. In addition, these are issues that may benefit from further research. They include:

- **Embedding basic skills** courses into other more popular courses;
- The use of **non-traditional venues** when delivering training;
- Linking courses into the screening process for **new employment opportunities**;
- Provision of adequate **childcare facilities**;
- **The system of support** available to learners;
- **Changing cultural perceptions** and organisational practices;
- **Involving local residents** in the design, content and provision of local courses;
- Effective **partnership working**, mainstreaming and sustainability;
- More 'structured' vs. more 'flexible / innovative' **approaches**;
- **Language / cultural** barriers.