

ReferNet Deutschland

Public financing of adult learning

GERMANY

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Authors: Adrienne Huismann and Ute Hippach-Schneider (BIBB)

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This paper focuses on public financing of adult learning in Germany. It was written in the context of the ReferNet Thematic perspectives series providing national overviews of specific themes in a common format and offering comparative dimension across the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.

After introducing the main actors for adult learning (AL) and its financing, the report describes publicly financed provision of AL as well as financial support for individuals and enterprises. The current public debates on adult learning, its financing and the setting-up of individual learning accounts (ILA) are reflected. The report concludes by addressing the availability of data on AL and its financing as well as monitoring carried out.

CHAPTER 1. Introduction

1.1 National implications of European adult learning policy priorities

German adult learning policy reflects several aspects of the EU agenda on AL, yet has its specific national dynamics:

Historically, Germany's AL system has been characterised by a marked reliance on private funding sources (employer investments and individual contributions), whereas public financing is primarily channelled through active labour market policies for unemployed individuals or those at risk of social exclusion, while also supporting advanced VET.

While Germany participates in dialogues on upskilling and lifelong learning at European level, its national policy debate has traditionally placed less emphasis on universal public financing for AL. Key instruments - such as the Upgrading Training Assistance (Aufstiegs-BAföG) and education vouchers - primarily target vocational continuing education. More recently, policy discussions have emerged about establishing an individual entitlement to AL that would extend state support beyond the existing active labour market framework (see Chapters 2 and 8).

Germany adopted a national continuing education strategy (National Skills Strategy) in 2019 - renewed in 2022, which brought together federal, state (Länder), industry, and trade union stakeholders to reshape and strengthen the overall continuing education landscape. This strategy explicitly aims at promoting a new continuing education culture - one in which lifelong learning becomes a matter of course for all citizens - and includes measures to enhance transparency, expand funding, and modernise support for non-formal and informal learning (see Chapters 3 and 7).

1.2 The level of public investment in adult learning

In Germany, adult learning has traditionally been driven by employer and individual contributions with public funding largely reserved for active labour market policies. Continuing education has been receiving significantly more attention in education policy for the past 10 to 15 years. This is reflected in programmes such as 'Advancement through Education,' the National Decade for Literacy and Basic Education, and the National Skills Strategy. In addition,

laws have been passed and are planned at state and federal level that focus on continuing vocational education and training against the backdrop of structural change (including educational leave laws, the Work of Tomorrow Act and the Act to Strengthen the Promotion of Initial and Continuing Training). The focus is on promoting participation, particularly in continuing vocational education and training, reducing persistent social and structural disadvantages, and expanding the range of programmes on offer and their accessibility. At the same time, new forms of coordination and cooperation between companies, social partners and continuing education providers are being established, for example by promoting continuing education networks in regional contexts (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024b).

While Germany maintains a high-performing VET system, public investment in broader adult learning is increasing. Due to significant participation gaps, especially among low-skilled and older adults, there is an emerging policy debate on expanding public investment, enhanced infrastructural support (such as longer paid training leaves), and mechanisms that lower financial barriers for disadvantaged groups (see Chapters 4 to 6). As the German economy navigates digitalisation, demographic change, and post-pandemic recovery, increased public financing of adult learning is increasingly seen as an investment in human capital. Improved AL participation can lead to higher productivity, reduced social exclusion, and enhanced resilience in a rapidly changing labour market (OECD, 2021).

1.3 Key national bodies responsible for adult learning and its financing

The key national public bodies responsible for adult learning and its financing in Germany are the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), particularly through its lifelong learning directorate; the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) together with the Federal Employment Agency (BA); and research-oriented bodies like the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE) and the Federal Institute of Vocational Education and Training (BIBB). At the state level, the Länder and local authorities manage and finance adult education institutions¹ such as Volkshochschulen. While there are some indicative budgetary figures in related sectors—for example, public funding for continuing vocational training - the decentralised nature of German education governance means that a unified, adult-learning-specific budget and clearly defined activity targets are not readily available. In the reports examined by Münchhausen et al. (2023), only the BIBB Data Report addresses both public and private financial expenditure (BIBB, 2024, B 3.5, p. 360). Public expenditure is regularly included in the report, with numerous different official statistics and administrative data being used for the compilation. Ultimately, this is an approximate determination of total public expenditure (see Chapter 9).

CHAPTER 2. Reflections on ILA implementation

2.1 Current public debate on adult learning, its financing and ILA

The costs of increasing public support for adult learning are regularly discussed among German policy-makers. Back in 2004, the Expert Commission on Financing Lifelong Learning recommended that the financing of lifelong learning should not be reduced to vocational training or skills that can be used in the world of work. It explicitly emphasises public responsibility for civic, general, political and cultural education. Comprehensive basic provision of general, political and cultural continuing education should continue to be ensured through institutional base funding by the federal states and local authorities. At the same time, vocational continuing education is seen as a key factor in ensuring the employability of workers so that they can keep pace with a changing world of work with new skill requirements (BMBF, 2024a, p. 100ff). There are numerous federal and state funding programmes for this purpose.

Table 1: Overview of funding opportunities for continuing vocational training

Initial situation	Possible subsidies	Financing
Employee	<p>Aufstiegs-BaföG (https://www.aufstiegs-bafoeg.de/aufstiegsbafoeg/de/home/home_node.html)</p> <p>Advancement scholarship (https://www.sbb-stipendien.de/aufstiegsstipendium)</p> <p>Further education scholarship (https://www.sbb-stipendien.de/weiterbildungsstipendium)</p> <p>Bildungsurlaub, see below (14477 Bildungsurlaube Infos & Gesetze Veranstalterverzeichnis Bildungsurlaub " + new Date().getFullYear() + " für ganz Deutschland)</p>	<p>Continuing education loans/educational loans (https://www.kfw.de/inlandsfoerderung/Privatpersonen/Studieren-Qualifizieren/F%C3%B6rderprodukte/Bildungskredit-(173)/)</p>
Self-employed	<p>Advancement scholarship KOMPASS - Compact help for the self-employed (https://www.esf.de/portal/DE/ESF-Plus-2021-2027/Foerderprogramme/bmas/kompass.html)</p>	<p>Continuing education loans, Funding</p>
Returning to work	<p>Advancement scholarship</p>	<p>Continuing education loans</p>
Jobseekers	<p>Education voucher (https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/karriere-und-weiterbildung/bildungsgutschein)</p> <p>Further education scholarship</p>	

Employer	Pay supplements under certain conditions (https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/unternehmen/finanziell/foerderung-von-weiterbildung)	
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In addition, there are tax breaks for employees, job seekers and people returning to work. For example, training costs can be deducted from tax. Similar provisions apply to self-employed persons and employers. It is also worth mentioning the possibility of educational leave. Educational leave refers to time off work for the purpose of further vocational or political education while continuing to receive remuneration.

The federal government provides the following types of support for continuing vocational education in particular:

Aufstiegsfortbildungsförderungsgesetz (Upgrading Training Assistance Act)

Since 1996 funding under the Upgrading Training Assistance Act - or AFBG in short - represents a statutory payment to support people undergoing training. The AFBG addresses people taking part in measures leading to advanced vocational qualifications, which are regulated by public law. Anyone who satisfies the statutory requirements can claim funding. Typical upgrading training measures are measures that lead to Meister and Fachwirt qualifications as well as courses at colleges of early childhood education or specialised technical colleges. The funding consists of a grant and a loan to cover the course and examination fees (measure costs). The grant amounts to 50% of the measure costs. The remaining 50% can be financed through a low-interest loan, which is not mandatory. The subsidies are called Aufstiegs-BaföG or Meister-BaföG (see 3.3 and 4.1). The funding is jointly financed by the federal government and the federal states (https://www.aufstiegsbafoeg.de/aufstiegsbafoeg/de/home/home_node.html).

Qualifizierungschancengesetz (Qualification Opportunities Act)

The Qualifizierungschancengesetz provides funding for up to 100 percent of continuing education costs. Further training courses that serve to adapt to the labour market are eligible for funding. Low-skilled employees without vocational qualifications or employees who have not practised their learned profession for more than four years are eligible for funding. Employers who want to enable their employees to undertake further training and receive financial support can also apply for funding from their local employment agency's employer service. The prerequisite is certification of the educational institution and the training measure ([https://www.bmas.de/DE/Service/Gesetze-und-Gesetzesvorhaben/qualifizierungschancengesetz.html?cms_documentType=law&cms_showNoDocType=true&cms_templateQueryString=qualifizierungschancengesetz\).Qualifizierungschancengesetz](https://www.bmas.de/DE/Service/Gesetze-und-Gesetzesvorhaben/qualifizierungschancengesetz.html?cms_documentType=law&cms_showNoDocType=true&cms_templateQueryString=qualifizierungschancengesetz).Qualifizierungschancengesetz)).

Advancement scholarship

The advancement scholarship supports experienced professionals in completing their first academic degree.

Further education scholarship

The further education scholarship from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) supports talented young people under the age of 25 in furthering their professional qualifications after completing vocational training. Job seekers and self-employed persons are also eligible for funding. The scholarship promotes challenging, usually part-time qualifications and further training for career advancement. To apply, you must have completed vocational training in a recognised dual training occupation or in a specialist occupation in the healthcare sector regulated by federal law. In addition, you must provide evidence of special qualifications for the further training scholarship. At the time of application, interested parties must either be working at least 15 hours per week or be registered as unemployed with the employment agency. Scholarship holders receive up to 8,700 euros (spread over three years) with a personal contribution of 10 per cent. In addition to course fees, participants in further training also receive subsidies for travel expenses, work materials and accommodation.

This database provides an overview of continuing education funding in the individual federal states: <https://www.iwwb.de/foerdersuche/foerdermoeglichkeiten.php>. Two programmes in particular are worth mentioning in relation to forms of financing individual learning activities and education savings.

The education bonus

The education bonus existed from 2008 to 2021. It was a public funding instrument for continuing education and consisted of two components: With the **bonus voucher**, the state covered 50 percent of the direct course costs, up to a maximum of EUR 500. A bonus voucher could be obtained by persons who were employed for at least fifteen hours per week. Their taxable annual income could not exceed EUR 20 000 (or EUR 40 000 for jointly assessed persons). The remaining costs for continuing education had to be covered by the individual, for example with the savings voucher from the education bonus (Bildungssparen). To be eligible for this subsidy, individuals had to receive personal, free counselling from a state-approved counselling centre. The **savings voucher** in the Fünften Vermögensbildungsgesetz (Fifth Capital Accumulation Act, VermBG) allowed early withdrawal from savings to finance further training, even if the blocking period had not yet expired (Section 4 (4) No. 4 5. VermBG). Use of the savings voucher required savings subsidised by an employee savings allowance and was independent of current income. The savings voucher could be used independently of the premium voucher. This meant that the personal contribution for the premium voucher could be made by withdrawing funds from the savings account. A prerequisite for using these funding options was that the educational institution of the applicant's choice was willing to accept education premium vouchers.

An evaluation of the programme showed that the instrument had a selective effect, i.e. the education bonus was more likely to be taken up by people who are better educated and trained, have fewer learning restrictions, are more inclined to participate in further training and are more likely to participate in further training even without the education bonus (Kantar, f-bb & IAW, 2019). The educational bonus covered the need for funding for continuing vocational

education and training among the target group of eligible persons. The educational bonus therefore reached people for whom the financial barrier was significant. However, the education bonus was not able to remove all barriers, such as insufficient prior education or a lack of interest in continuing education, nor was it able to completely eliminate financial constraints.

The NRW Education Cheque

The 'Bildungsscheck NRW' (NRW Education Cheque) subsidy was discontinued in 2024 for reasons related to subsidy law. Between 2006 and 2024, around 698,300 education cheques were issued, 60 per cent of which went to companies and 40 per cent to individuals. Funding was provided exclusively from the European Social Fund (ESF). A total of EUR 260.15 million in ESF funds was spent on this programme. The funding programme was launched in 2006 to encourage people to pursue continuing vocational training, further develop the economy and tap into new competitive advantages. As part of the NRW skilled labour initiative, the state government intends to continue offering flexible support for individual continuing vocational training exclusively to people on low incomes. The planned funding is currently still in preparation and is expected to be available in the course of 2025 ([Bildungsscheck NRW - Weiterkommen durch Weiterbildung | Mit Menschen für Menschen](#)).

2.2 Recent developments in setting-up ILA and the enabling framework

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research has just started planning to set up a national ILA scheme. This new demand-driven funding instrument should provide low-income individuals with regular entitlements (of up to EUR 2 000) to cover the direct costs of adult learning courses in job-related (non-formal) and general further education. This ILA scheme aims to open up new flexible training opportunities for low-income earners – those who are in most need to (further) develop professional and future skills – in a self-determined way. Given the extensive support measures already in place, it is planned to initially focus the state subsidy for entitlements (collectable in the individual learning account) on a specific target group, being individuals above 25 years with a yearly income below a defined threshold of about EUR 28 000. The initiative is still at a very early starting phase. So far there is no timeline for further process (EMCO self-assessment questionnaire on ILAs - Germany 2024).

2.3 Fit of ILA within the existing adult learning financing system

See above 2.1

CHAPTER 3. Publicly financed provision of adult learning

As part of the European 2030 strategy, Germany has set itself the goal of increasing participation in further training to 65%. According to the Adult Education Survey, 58% of 18 to 64-year-olds in Germany took part in continuous education in 2022, with the participation rate falling slightly by 2 percentage points compared to 2020, after rising by 10 percentage points overall between 2016 and 2020 (BIBB, 2024). In-company training programmes financed wholly or partly by employers were the most common form of continuing education in 2022 (48%), followed by non-vocational training (17%) and individual vocational training (8%). There are still significant differences in participation rates according to educational attainment, position in the company and company size (BMBF, 2024b).

3.1 Basic skills training (outside of formal programmes)

The main providers of basic skills training are adult education centres, as well as church- and trade union-affiliated organisations.

Adult education centres (Volkshochschulen VHS) receive public co-financing and are the main providers of basic skills training outside of formal programmes. For the reporting year 2023, statistics (Volkshochschul-Statistik) were available from 822 of the total 838 adult education centres. Of the VHS centres, 63.7% were under the direct public sponsorship of a municipality, district, special-purpose association or city state; 30.5% were run as a registered association and 5.7% were under private sponsorship. In 2023, the total funding of the VHS amounted to EUR 1.58 billion. Institutional funding via grants from the federal states, districts and municipalities accounted for 38.0% of income; around a quarter (22.8%) were participation fees and around a third (33.5%) were public funds raised from the federal government, federal states, municipalities and the EU (including German Social Code SGB funds). The latter also included grants from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), which accounted for 21.8% of total income. According to the VHS-statistics 2023, the basic education programme area accounted for 1.3% of all courses, 2.8% of total teaching hours and 1.1% of all enrolments. The basic education programme area includes courses to acquire basic skills in literacy, numeracy and everyday skills. This programme area consists of five subject areas and comprised a total of 399 183 teaching hours in 2023. The largest subject areas were vocational orientation and preparation (36.9% of teaching hours), literacy (31.8% of teaching hours) and interdisciplinary/other courses (15.1% of teaching hours). Courses in the field of literacy are also run by VHS across all subject areas. In 2023, 7 885 such courses took place nationwide; this corresponds to 1.7% of all registered courses. The courses comprised 704 066 teaching hours (4.9% of teaching hours) and there were 94 430 enrolments (1.8%). Of these courses, 29.9% (2 357 courses) were offered in the basic education programme area, specialising in literacy, and 70.1% (5 528 courses) in the languages programme area. Of the latter, 4 940 were integration courses with a focus on literacy and 588 were German courses with a focus on literacy, but which are not integration courses (Ortmanns et al., 2024).

Church and trade unions related associations are providing basic education as well.

Together with the main provider VHS, they form a network of adult education providers and compile their statistical reports (Weiterbildungsstatistik im Verbund wbv). The wbv network comprised 1 956 institutions for the 2021 reporting year of which 1 617 institutions (83%) were covered. In 2021, the institutions surveyed reported a combined income of around EUR 1.517 billion, which consisted primarily of public funds (1.03 million, i.e. 68%) and participation fees (17%). To a lesser extent, income came from the providers' or institutions' own funds (3%) and non-public event-related funds (1%). In 2021, 50% of the institutions included in the network were public corporations. Courses in basic education / literacy accounted for 3 823 (1.1%) courses, 240 151 (2.6%) hours and 28 632 (0.9%) enrolments in 2021 (Horn & Lux, 2024).

In addition, the Federal Government and the Länder collaborate closely with all partners of the National Decade for Literacy and Basic Education ([AlphaDekade](#) 2016-2026) to reduce functional illiteracy and raise the level of basic skills in Germany, for example by funding pilot projects to expand learning offers, make the offers more accessible and adapted to the target groups, among others (funding volume 2016-26: approx. EUR 180 million).

The transition programmes at upper secondary level (leading to EQF level 1-2 and ISCED level 254) cover pre-vocational measures that do not lead to a vocational qualification (public expenditures of EUR 206.66 million for § 51 SGB III pre-VET measures in 2023 with 46 000 participants). These are mainly educational programmes such as the pre-vocational training year (Berufsvorbereitungsjahr - BVJ) or introductory training (Einstiegsqualifizierung – EQ: public expenditures of EUR 21.41 million for SGB II/III and 8 000 participants in 2023). BVJ is a state-recognised programme that take place at **vocational schools**. An EQ is a social security-contributory internship in a **company**. Employment agencies or job centres support this with a subsidy towards the internship remuneration and a lump sum for social security contributions. Young people and adults with learning difficulties, handicap or insufficient German language skills have the possibility to attend these one-year lasting transition programmes. One fourth of entrants possess no basic qualification, another 48% graduated with the lower qualification from lower secondary education. These programmes are not considered as CVET but it is available to adults. Although most entrants are young people, a certain share may be aged 25+, which was the case especially in 2016 with refugees from Syria and in 2022 with refugees from Ukraine (Dohmen, 2018; Autor:innengruppe, 2024a).

3.2 Formal non-tertiary educational programmes for adults

(both general and VET programmes, up to and including at post-secondary non-tertiary level)

Adults can complete a school-leaving qualification alongside their job. This is known as the second educational pathway or second chance education. They can obtain the qualification at so-called evening schools (Abendschulen), which are state-accredited programmes that follow formal curricula and lead to recognised school-leaving certificates. Depending on the type of school, lessons take place during the day, in the evening or at the weekend. Full-time study is possible at colleges (Kolleg). Education is a matter for the federal states. That is why not all types of school exist in every federal state.

The following formal secondary school-leaving certificates can be obtained at the respective mainly state-run school: lower secondary school-leaving certificate (EQF 2) at evening schools, adult education centres (VHS) and other educational institutions; intermediate school-leaving certificate (EQF 3) at evening secondary schools and vocational schools, and finally, higher education entrance qualification (EQF 4) at colleges (Kolleg - full-time) or evening grammar schools (Abendgymnasium - part-time) and at specialised upper secondary vocational schools (e.g. Berufsoberschule BOS and Fachoberschule FOS). According to the online database from the German federal statistical office (Statistische Bundesamt, 2024, table 21111-03), 699 adults were enrolled in state-run evening schools preparing EQF 2 level, 11 327 preparing EQF 3 level, and 13 435 preparing EQF 4 level school-leaving qualification during the school year 2023/24. Some private schools approved by the Länder are also providing such programmes, but to a small extent.

Beside the public evening schools, the main provider are the adult education centres VHS. The VHS school-leaving qualifications programme area comprises nine subject areas that are used by adults to catch up on school qualifications or prepare for an examination or a course of study. In 2023, 715 207 teaching hours took place in the entire programme area. The largest subject areas were courses to obtain the lower secondary school leaving certificate (34.3% of teaching hours with 10 836 enrolments), the intermediate secondary school leaving certificate (30.4% of teaching hours with 7 916 enrolments), courses to obtain the general higher education entrance qualification and interdisciplinary / other courses (each with 11.4% of teaching hours and 1 664 respectively 23 978 enrolments). The highest number of courses (2 989 out of a total of 6 633 courses and 23 500 out of 69 720 enrolments) in this programme area was provided in the subject area of school-leaving certificate-related individual courses / school-leaving certificate and examination preparation. Of the 5 102 school examinations taken, around half (49.9%) were aimed at obtaining a lower secondary school leaving certificate, while 43.4% were aimed at obtaining an intermediate school leaving certificate. The remaining 6.7% took part in examinations to obtain a higher education entrance qualification (Ortmanns et al., 2024, Table 9, p. 68). For general information on public financing of adult education centres VHS, please see 3.1.

Beside completing a formal general secondary school-leaving qualification, adults can also complete a formal vocational qualification at EQF 4 (corresponding to a recognized dual training qualification) level through successive partial qualifications (Teilqualifikationen TQ) alongside their job. Such programmes are provided by the employers and the chambers of Industry and Commerce, partly with the support of the federal education ministry BMBF.

Further, adults with no formal qualifications but with skills learned on the job can have these assessed and certified against the standards of a recognised dual training occupation (EQF 4 level). The ValiKom project (2014-17) and its follow-up ValiKom transfer (2018-24; funding volume: 12.3 million euros; by 31.12.2023: 32 chambers with 2 721 validation processes in 40 different occupations) promoted the validation of non-formally and informally

acquired skills in Germany and were initiated by the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts (DHKT) and the German Chambers of Commerce and Industry (DIHK), together with the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF). ValiKom was a reference project for setting up a validation system in Germany. From 1 January 2025, professional skills can be assessed by the competent chamber using the new legally regulated assessment procedure: The Vocational training validation and digitisation act (BVaDiG), passed in July 2024. For the first time, people aged 25 and older without a formal vocational qualification are entitled to have their vocational skills assessed and certified against the standards of a dual training occupation.

At post-secondary level, specialised programmes regulated by Federal or State law are offered at EQF levels 4 to 5, lasting 1 to 3 years and leading to entrance qualifications for universities. The providers are senior vocational school (Berufsoberschule BOS), specialised upper secondary school (Fachoberschule FOS), schools of health, education and social care (GES) and other vocational schools such as Fachschule and Fachakademie.

3.3 Higher education for adults

As already described in 3.2., adults have the possibility to acquire the higher education entrance qualification using the so-called second chance education pathway, e.g. in an evening school. Besides, the approach allowing adults to enter higher education without the formal entrance qualification has been increasingly opened, addressing in particular VET graduates. According to the “Bildung in Deutschland - kompakt 2024” (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024b), universities are establishing themselves with continuing education degree programmes, as well as shorter certificate programmes at academic level.

Nevertheless, continuing academic education at universities is still only a niche area of continuing education as a whole in 2022, aimed at a limited target group. The commitment of the universities also differs according to their funding body and type of university. At private universities and UASs, 43% of all Master's degree programmes are continuing education courses, compared to only 11% at public universities and UASs. Besides traditional Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes, dual study programmes are offered at EQF levels 6 (Bachelor) to 7 (Master) by different higher education institutions, e.g. universities of applied sciences (UASs, Fachhochschulen – 70% of all dual study programmes), the dual university (Duale Hochschulen – 16%), universities of cooperative education (Berufsakademien – 9%) as well as some universities. They provide a blend of academic and vocational training, in which in-company training is an important element (share of at least 40 to 50%). Enterprises bear the costs of company-based training and pay learners a wage. Higher education for adults can also be provided as distance education at Universities and UAS. In 2022, 482 providers offered 4 318 training courses that met the criteria of the Distance Learning Protection Act - FernUSG (BIBB 2024, B 2.3).

Another pathway at tertiary level for those with vocational qualifications and professional experience are advanced vocational qualifications at EQF levels 5 to 7 to be acquired by regulated exams (assessment and certification by the chambers). At EQF level 6 (bachelor

professional, e.g. Meister), the qualifications entitle graduates to exercise a trade, to hire and train apprentices, and to enroll in academic bachelor programmes. Graduates can continue at EQF level 7 (master professional). These qualifications support the acquisition of middle and top management positions in companies. Preparation courses for the exams are offered by chambers or schools. Further, advanced vocational programmes are offered at state regulated technical and trade schools at EQF 6, lasting 1.5 to 4 years. Entrance requirements include specific vocational qualification and work experience. They lead to an advanced qualification (such as technician, educator) and give access to the relevant field of academic study or occupation (agriculture, design, technology, business and social care). All the programmes at EQF 5-7 levels described above are available for adults and most programmes can be considered as continuing (vocational) education or advanced VET.

The federal government primarily contributes to the financing of advanced vocational education and training by subsidising living expenses for participants in continuing education. This includes funding under the Upgrading Training Assistance Act (AFBG, so-called Aufstiegs-BAFÖG) with public expenses by BMBF of EUR 880 million in 2023 with 190 100 beneficiaries, as well as BAföG benefits for students in specialised vocational schools that require a completed vocational training programme. In addition, the federal states are involved in the promotion of advanced vocational training, with public expenses for AFBG by the Länder of EUR 248 million in 2023. Their share is set by law at 22% and can be calculated from the figures in the BMBF budget, which bears the entire federal share of 78%. The funds for the AFBG have been significantly increased since 2019 as part of the National Skills Strategy. Further, the federal states fund technical colleges and universities (BIBB 2024, B 3.5). In 2023, as in the previous year, nursery school teachers were the most funded occupation with an AFBG training measure (56 800 people). Second place was taken by master craftsmen and women in the metalworking industry (Industriemeister/-in Metall; EQF level 6) with 9 600 recipients, followed by certified business administrators (Wirtschaftsfachwirt/-in; EQF level 6) in third place with 8 900 recipients. A total of EUR 1 064 million in funding was available under the AFBG in 2023, which was 3.6% more than in the previous year.

On 24 July 2024, the Federal Cabinet approved improvements to the AFBG. They are intended to increase the attractiveness of the AFBG, strengthen higher-qualification vocational training and thus the successful recruitment of skilled labour. In addition, the participation costs in AFBG-funded training programmes are to be reduced for participants. Further, from 1 August 2024, the 29th BAföG Amendment Act also provides AFBG recipients with more financial support and improved funding conditions. Finally, with the introduction of a qualification allowance in April 2024, the Act to promote initial and further training (passed in 2023) makes continuing vocational training more accessible.

Two specific funding opportunities exist, which are based on the programme “Support for gifted VET graduates”, with public expenses by BMBF of EUR 70 million in 2023 (SBB, 2024). This funding programme provides support through different pathways: the further training grant (Weiterbildungsstipendium - Funding volume in 2023: EUR 26.4 million and up to 6 500 new scholarships per year) and the advancement scholarship (Aufstiegsstipendium – Funding

volume in 2023: EUR 26.8 million and up to 1 500 new scholarships per year). Funding amounts to EUR 8 700 over a period of 3 years, another 10% have to be financed by the beneficiary (Cedefop & BIBB, 2023, p. 50). One new option for financial support is the pilot scholarship programme for talented apprentices and skilled workers (BAFF), which started in 2024. This is a double innovation: on the one hand, scholarship funding for talented learners now also includes the early phase of training. Secondly, the organisations for the promotion of gifted academic students are opening up to vocational training.

3.4 Non-formal / liberal adult education

(incl. in response to societal, environmental, technological and security developments, etc.)

Adult education centres (Volkshochschulen VHS) receive public co-financing and are the main providers of non-formal / liberal adult education. The VHS provide courses in seven programme areas, six of them belong to the non-formal education spectrum: Languages (34% with 160 000 courses and 1.7 million enrollments), Health and Fitness (34% of courses), Culture/Design (16%), Politics/Society/Environment (7%), work-oriented IT / Organising / Management (7%) and Basic Education (1% - see 3.1). For general information on financing of VHS, please see 3.1. and the VHS-statistics 2023 (based on 822 out of 838 centres). With the main provider VHS, church and trade unions related associations are providing non-formal / liberal adult education as well. For general information on public funding of these organisations, please see 3.1.

They offer courses in 10 thematic areas: 1. Politics - Society - Gender - Working world, 2. Family - Generations, 3. Religion - Ethics, 4. Environment - Sustainability - Natural sciences, 5. Culture - Design, 6. Health (fitness), 7. Languages, 8. Media applications - Technology, 9. School-leaving qualifications, and 10. Basic education - literacy.

Except the courses preparing for school-leaving qualifications (6 045 courses or 1.8%; 739 294 hours or 8%; 50 954 enrolments or 1.6%), all courses can be considered as non-formal / liberal education: 326 732 courses, ca. 8.5 million hours and ca. 3.2 million enrolments in 2021 (Horn & Lux, 2024).

3.5 Educational opportunities accessible via public employment services

As an instrument of active labour market policy, the funding of continuing vocational training aims to improve the chances of unemployed people and those threatened by unemployment on the labour market and to ensure that they remain on the labour market. It is at the core of the funding measures set out in the German Social Code SGB II (focus: basic benefits for jobseekers) and III (focus: employment promotion). Part of the Citizens' Basic Income (Bürgergeld) can be dedicated to continuous vocational training. The principle of 'training before temporary work' applies. Since 1 July 2023, recipients of basic income who want to obtain a vocational qualification as second chance can receive full funding for the training period – for three years instead of two. Those who first need to expand their basic skills, such as reading, maths or IT skills, can receive funding for this. In addition, a monthly training allowance of EUR 150 is paid for participation in training leading to a qualification (Die Bundesregierung, 2024).

The catalogue of measures ranges from preparatory measures for acquiring basic skills to short-term further training and qualification programmes that are geared towards acquiring a vocational qualification (retraining) or obtaining a lower secondary school leaving certificate at a later date.

In addition to unemployed persons, the Federal Employment Agency (BA) can also provide funding for further training for employees in companies: the employee's work must be affected by structural change and the training must last at least 120 hours (Autor:innengruppe 2024a).

The main public funding comes from the BA and the federal labour ministry (BMAS). The types of programmes are support of continuing vocational training fbW (BA: EUR 1.501 billion and BMAS: EUR 0.575 billion in 2023) and training for unemployed (BA: EUR 1.222 billion in 2023). In 2022, there were 260 678 entries into funding for continuing vocational training under SGB II (86 637) and SGB III (170 041) according to the BIBB Datenreport (BIBB, 2024, B 3). In 2023, around 300 000 people received funding for continuing vocational training. This included 71 000 people entering a qualification-oriented training programme. In the process, 41 000 individuals were funded to obtain a vocational qualification as second-chance training. Of all individuals who entered into funded continuing vocational training, 49 000 entered into continuing vocational training for employees. In addition, wage subsidies (CVET allowance - Weiterbildungsgeld) were paid for continuing vocational training for around 42 000 employees (BMBF 2024) as well as training bonuses (Weiterbildungsprämie) for successful intermediate and final examinations as incentives.

Further, the 'Future Starters' initiative supports the upskilling of young (25 to under 35 years old) low-skilled adults, with 29,500 new participants recorded in 2022, of which 13 800 were in partial qualifications. The initiative runs on a regular basis and since the agreement on a continuation in January 2022, around 52 000 young adults have embarked on qualification-oriented further apprenticeships. In addition, a good 10 500 young adults have started unsubsidised apprenticeships as part of the initiative (BMBF, 2024a).

3.6 Educational opportunities accessible for institutionalised populations

(e.g. those in penitentiary institutions, migrant hostels, homeless shelters, disability care, etc.)

Adult education and training measures during the prison term serve in particular to impart, maintain or promote the skills of prisoners for gainful employment after release. The legal basis for adult education in prison is derived from provisions of the German federal state prison laws (labour, training and further education, §§ 37 ff. StVollzG) and from the provisions of vocational training and vocational support legislation, in particular the Vocational Training Act (BBiG) and the Social Security Code (SGB). According to SGB III, vocational training and further education can be funded by the Federal Employment Agency. Prisoners can obtain school-leaving certificates relevant for further education or university studies. Teaching is based on the regulations that apply in state schools.

Vocational training can be completed in several German prisons. Inmates learn initial vocational skills, and the aim is also to foster an interest in further learning and a regular working day. The inmates are trained in self-employed or entrepreneurial activities within the

prison. While the practical training is carried out in the prison's own training companies, the theoretical part of the training is taught by the prison office's vocational school. In addition to traditional training programmes, some penal institutions also offer so-called short training courses that last only two or four months. There is a wide range of training opportunities, including: energy electronics engineer, media designer, bricklayer, painter and varnisher, cook, welder, gardener or tiler.

It is also possible to start and complete a university degree in some German prisons. Inmates who wish to study at university while in prison must either have an entrance qualification for higher education or a completed vocational training with more than three years of professional experience. Once they have enrolled, the studies can be started as a distance learning course. The Elis learning platform (e-learning in prisons) was developed to enable student offenders to access the website and an offline version of Wikipedia. Elis is already used throughout Germany, with the exception of Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia (Hartenstein & Prätör, 2023).

3.7 Validation and guidance services

For validation of vocational skills of people (25 and older) without a formal vocational qualification against the standards of a dual training occupation, please see 3.2. To promote guidance services for adult learners, the National Skills Strategy, signed by all continuing education and training (CET) actors in 2019 and renewed in 2022, aims to develop and join up the existing lifelong CET guidance and counselling services, especially those of the Federal State, with its employment agencies, the Länder, chambers, associations and education organisations, to create a nationwide, high-quality counselling structure for lifelong learning. CET counselling must also aim, in close consultation with companies (in particular SMEs), to boost the motivation of the relevant groups of people (low-skilled individuals, skilled workers, future managers) to participate in CVET, and must seek to ensure that the threshold for access to CVET is as low as possible. One example is the INVITE programme, which aims at increasing participation in CVET by connecting existing learning platforms, improving the transparency and quality of digital CVET offers, and allowing a low-threshold, individual, modular approach, building on existing skills, in a secure digital environment.

Further, the federal labour ministry, the social partners and the Federal States are supporting the Federal Employment Agency Lifelong career counselling (LBB) project (counselling before entering working life, counselling during working life, and a career counselling self-discovery tool), with a focus on the needs of organisations and in close consultation with the social partners and regional business self-governance structures. The LBB systematic career guidance and counselling service was introduced nationwide in 2019 and 2020, followed in 2021 by the online self-exploration tool New plan, which shows possibilities for development or further training on the job. Another new tool for information and advice support for adult learners run by the BA on its website is the comprehensive tool “mein NOW” (Fördernavigator). Further, the association “German national guidance forum in education, career and employment” (nfb) is committed to the professional development of guidance services in Germany.

At local level, several initiatives and networks support the transition of learners into the

labour market as well as lifelong learning for adults: the municipalities education programme (Bildungskommunen); the regional transition management programme (Regionales Übergangsmanagement); the Transfer initiative municipal education management (Transferinitiative Kommunales Bildungsmanagement). Training providers, employment agencies, chambers, enterprises, local schools and municipalities, trade unions, as well as other local actors and stakeholders, participate in these networks (Cedefop & BIBB, 2023).

CHAPTER 4. Financial support for individuals

4.1 Grants/vouchers

There are different national arrangements to provide financial support to individuals to undertake adult learning activities, in particular further vocational education and training.

Upgrading Training Assistance Act (Aufstiegsfortbildungsförderungsgesetz, AFBG, known as Aufstiegs-BaföG)

The national key instrument AFBG is the most comprehensive funding instrument for advanced VET. It is a major pillar and driver of skills upgrading and occupational advancement. AFBG, the equivalent to university student grants (BAföG), was last amended in 2024 to improve the funding, support and expand available funding options to new target groups. The body responsible is the federal education ministry BMBF. This law gives craftspeople and other skilled workers a statutory entitlement to financial assistance to cover costs of advanced vocational training and living expenses to acquire higher VET qualifications (at tertiary education level). It increases VET career attractiveness and its equivalence to academic education. The portal [Die Förderung - BMBF Aufstiegs-BAföG](#) explains who can apply for funding, how to get funding, gives examples of beneficiaries and features a blog full of information. The funding is for advanced VET (EQF 5-7). Typical upgrading training measures are measures that lead to Meister and Fachwirt qualifications as well as courses at colleges of early childhood education or specialised vocational colleges. In Germany, over 700 equivalent further training measures are eligible for funding under the AFBG.

The financing is jointly covered by the federal (BMBF: 78%) and state governments (22%) as well as the KfW Development Bank for loans. The funding is allocated as grant and low-interest bank loans. The types of costs covered are training costs for master craftsperson course (including exam fees) or for other programmes leading to a comparable qualification, as well as living expenses. Irrespective of their income and assets, participants receive a sum equivalent to the level of actual fees up to a maximum of EUR 15 000 in order to cover course and examination fees. Participants receive 50% of the funding in the form of a non-repayable grant. Participants receive an offer from the KfW Development Bank for a low-interest bank loan for the remaining share of 50%. People taking part in full-time measures can also receive a contribution towards the cost of living in addition to funding to cover training costs. This payment to cover living expenses depends on the individual's income and assets as well as on the income of his or her spouse or life partner and the number of children. As of 1 August 2024, funding to cover living expenses is entirely paid in the form of a non-repayable grant. The maximum payment for single persons is EUR 1 019 euros per month. In 2023, the national public funding (BMBF) was EUR 880 million and the state public funding was EUR 248 million, so a total of EUR 1.128 billion public funding for this programme. In 2023, the number of funding recipients was 190 100.

Federal training assistance Act (Bundesausbildungsförderungsgesetz, BAföG)

According to this national key instrument, individuals receive state-funded contributions to

their costs for education and training. Nearly all groups of learners can apply for the grant. Personal conditions for entitlement to a grant are German citizenship or residence status listed in § 8, the general suitability for the chosen training and the age limit of 30 years (35 years for master studies). The eligible education and training activities include nearly all kinds of training and education measures (e.g. secondary general education from class 10, vocational schools, technical and specialised secondary schools, higher technical schools and academies and universities). Beneficiaries receive a lump sum based on the individual criteria. Since 2024, training costs for which funding can be received can go up to a maximum amount of EUR 992. The share, as well as the maximum amount, do not differ for different groups. There is no limitation to re-use the grant (Source: [Startseite - BAföG](#)).

Education voucher (Bildungsgutschein)

The legal basis for the training voucher is Section 81 of the German Social Code (SGB III). The Federal Employment Agency BA (under the responsibility of the federal labour ministry BMAS) is implementing this national key instrument. The aim is to improve employability in order to end unemployment or avert the threat of unemployment with an adaptation qualification, retraining or partial qualification. Therefore, unemployed and employed people with risk of losing their job can apply for this training voucher. Funding is provided after mandatory counselling at the Federal Employment Agency, which decides on the funding on a case-by-case basis. The training voucher is limited in time, regionally limited and restricted to a specific educational objective. Both the training provider and the course must be authorised by a competent authority. The platform “Mein NOW” provides a database of authorised further training measures (<https://mein-now.de/weiterbildungssuche/>). In case of a qualification-oriented further training, the employment agency may pay a monthly allowance of EUR 150 (Weiterbildungsgeld) as well as bonuses for passing exams (EUR 1 000 for intermediate and EUR 1 500 for final exam). Hundred percent of course costs are covered. In addition, travel costs and other additional expenses can be funded. If the further training measure starts while receiving unemployment benefit, this will generally continue to be paid. In 2023, the BA supported continuing vocational training (fbW) with EUR 1.501 billion and the BMAS with EUR 0.575 billion. Further, the BA supported training for unemployed with EUR 1.222 billion. In 2022, there were 260 678 entries into funding for continuing vocational training for unemployed under SGB II (86 637) and for employees under SGB III (170 041) according to the BIBB Datenreport 2024 (Chapter B 3). In 2023, around 300 000 people received funding for continuing vocational training. This included 71 000 people entering a qualification-oriented training programme. In the process, 41 000 individuals were funded to obtain a vocational qualification as second-chance training. Of all individuals who entered into funded continuing vocational training, 49 000 entered into continuing vocational training for employees. Source: [Bildungsgutschein für berufliche Weiterbildung | Bundesagentur für Arbeit](#)

Further training grant (Weiterbildungsstipendium)

The federal education ministry BMBF has commissioned the Foundation for the promotion of talented young people in vocational training SBB (Stiftung Begabtenförderung berufliche Bildung) with the nationwide coordination of the further training grant programme in

cooperation with the local chambers and other competent bodies, who implement the funding for their applicants. The SBB implements the funding for graduates in the healthcare professions. The further training scholarship supports gifted and motivated young people in gaining further professional qualifications following the successful completion of their initial vocational training. The programme thus aims at strengthening the equivalence of vocational and academic education as well as increasing the permeability of the education system. The grant supports specialist and interdisciplinary further training as well as part-time university programmes. Funding is provided for the measure itself, for travel and accommodation costs and for costs of work materials. Scholarship recipients may apply for a total of EUR 8 700 for an unlimited amount of advanced training courses eligible for funding within the 3-year funding period. They are required to bear 10% of costs themselves per course.

In 2023, the volume of funding was EUR 26.4 million, of which 23.4 million for scholarship holders in dual training occupations (distributed by 275 competent chambers and bodies), and 3 million for scholarship holders of regulated healthcare professions (distributed by SBB). In 2023, 6 192 scholarship holders were newly accepted into the programme. A total of around 170 000 further education scholarships have already been awarded since the programme was launched in 1991. Since 2023, a gradual increase from 6 000 to 6 500 scholarships per year is planned by 2024 (SBB, 2024).

Advancement scholarship (Aufstiegsstipendium)

The federal education ministry BMBF has also commissioned the Foundation for the promotion of talented young people in vocational training SBB (Stiftung Begabtenförderung berufliche Bildung) with the nationwide coordination of the advancement scholarship programme in cooperation with the local chambers and other competent bodies. The chambers provide information about the advancement scholarship programme. They refer those interested in this programme to the SBB, which organises the selection process. The upgrading scholarship offers incentives to study for skilled workers with professional experience, whether or not they gained a higher education entrance qualification at school. The programme is thus strengthening the equivalence of vocational and academic education and increasing the permeability of the education system. It was established for professionals with at least 2 years' work experience and with outstanding talents. When qualified skilled professionals are already working, financial issues often prevent them from starting a course of studies. It is the only academic programme supporting talented students who are combining work and study (over a third of the scholarship holders) or studying full-time for the duration of their course of studies. The scholarship programme supports both part-time students (EUR 2 900 per year) and full-time students (EUR 1 014 per month) for the duration of their studies (standard period of study). The funding volume of the programme by BMBF was EUR 26.8 million in 2023. In 2023, 1 103 scholarship holders were newly accepted into the programme. A total of over 16 000 advancement scholarships have already been awarded since the programme was launched in 2008. A gradual increase from 1 000 to 1 500 scholarships per year is planned for 2023 (SBB, 2024).

Continuing education bonus (Bildungsprämie) – expired in 2021

To encourage groups of people that tend to have lower rates of participation in company-based continuing vocational training (workers on low incomes, women, employees in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), people working part-time and healthcare professionals), the federal government (BMBF) approved a financing scheme in 2008: premium and savings vouchers. The premium voucher reduced training costs by up to 50 percent of tuition fees (max EUR 500) for job-related training courses or courses that helped improve people's employability. The voucher targeted employees and the self-employed who worked at least 15 hours a week and had a maximum taxable annual income of EUR 20 000 (or 40 000 for couples) or were on parental leave. The voucher was valid for 6 months. People could receive vouchers every 2 years. The savings voucher provided a right to withdraw money from capital formation saving plans without losing the savings grant. This was open to all people who had such saving plans, regardless of their income. Guidance to access the scheme was provided centrally on the national level by phone or by advisors at the local level. This measure was co-funded by the European Social Fund ESF. From 2008 to 2021, 402 000 premium vouchers were issued and 30 000 individual CVET savings plans established. The programme ended in December 2021. An evaluation of the scheme is available. While participants satisfaction levels were high, findings suggested that the scheme mostly reached those individuals that would most likely also have participated in CVET without the bonus. The programme was discontinued, following critical assessments by the German Federal Court of Auditors regarding the scheme's efficiency (high administrative costs; more than EUR 5 billion per year) and limited effectiveness. Source: <https://www.bildungspraemie.info/>.

North Rhine-Westphalia: education cheque (Bildungsscheck NRW) – expired in 2024

The Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia MAGS initiated this regional key funding programme in 2006 to encourage people to take part in in-company training, to develop the economy and to gain new competitive advantages. Employees with an annual taxable income between EUR 20 000 and EUR 40 000 as well as individuals re-entering the job market and self-employed, residents in North Rhine Westphalia could apply for the state-funded grant (voucher system). Employees in the public service were excluded from the scheme. The eligible education and training activities focused on defined professional qualifications and technical skills or key skills. Funding was always provided exclusively from the European Social Fund (ESF). The co-funding share was 50% of the costs for education and training (max EUR 500). The same applicant could use the scheme once in each calendar year. The total ESF funding for the programme was EUR 260.15 million. Between 2006 and 2024, around 698 300 education vouchers were issued, 60% of which were issued to companies and 40% to individuals.

The 'Bildungsscheck NRW' funding programme was discontinued in 2024 for funding law related reasons. As part of the NRW skilled labour offensive, the state government intends to continue to offer flexible support for individual vocational training exclusively for people with lower incomes. The planned funding is currently being prepared and is expected to be available in the course of 2025. Source: <https://www.mags.nrw/bildungsscheck>

Eight (out of sixteen) federal states currently offer different voucher training programmes that support individual training through direct training cost subsidies (varying from 40% to

100%), which are usually paid-out after course completion. Most voucher programmes (with the exception of one) are financed through ESF+ funds. Target groups within regional programmes vary substantially, ranging from employees below differently set income thresholds, employees within SMEs, the general population below income thresholds, to self-employed individuals. The funding scheme are usually known as education cheque (Bildungsscheck), qualification cheque (Qualischeck) or further education cheque (Weiterbildungsscheck). Source: [Förderdatenbank - Förderprogramme - QualiScheck – Förderung](#)

4.2 Subsidized loans

There is one scheme of subsidized loans available for students in tertiary education, the so-called KfW Student's loan (KfW Studienkredit). According to this national support instrument, individuals currently enrolled at a state or state-recognised tertiary institution in Germany, who are not older than 44 years, can apply for the loan. No preferential treatment is applied. The loan is provided by the KfW bank in Germany. The interest rate is generally variable. It is based on a certain reference interest plus a contractually agreed premium. The interest rates are adjusted every six months. Source: [KfW-Studienkredit \(174\) | KfW](#)

4.3 Tax incentives

Tax incentives for adult learning exist in the form of a **tax allowance** – work-related (income-related) expenses / special expenses (*Steuerliche Absetzbarkeit als Werbungskosten / Sonderausgaben*). The main laws regulating these deductions are §9 and §10(1) No 7 EStG German Income Tax Act. Adults can deduct costs related to continuing vocational training for their current occupation or a future occupation from the base of their individual income tax. Co-funded training is expected to sustain or increase future income, implying higher tax revenues later on. Eligible costs include tuition fees, costs for teaching material and professional literature, related travel and accommodation costs as well as the costs of a computer. For the deduction of special expenses, a ceiling is introduced (EUR 6 000). The tax incentive can be used once in each calendar year.

Source: <https://www.test.de/Steuererklaerung-Bildungskosten-absetzen-5230750-0/>

CHAPTER 5. Financial support for enterprises

5.1 Subsidies/grants

There are different national arrangements to provide funding for enterprises to support adult learning activities, in particular further vocational education and training.

Qualifications Opportunities Act (Qualifizierungschancengesetz)

This national key incentive provides co-funding for further education of employees, as part of the *Qualifizierungsoffensive* of the Federal State. The further training support for employees (FbW) was reformed with the Qualification Opportunities Act in 2019 and the Work of Tomorrow Act (Arbeit-von-Morgen-Gesetz) in 2020. The incentives are a contribution to securing skilled workers and aim at better reaching SMEs and their employees, who are less likely to take part in further training. All employees and companies are eligible for funding, but most of the funding goes to SMEs: 75% of funding is allocated to employees in companies with 1-249 employees. The funded qualification must take at least 160 hours, and only certified courses are eligible. The funding by BMAS and BA comprises the coverage of training course costs for the respective employees on the one hand and the granting of wage subsidies to employers for periods of absence from work due to further training on the other. The share of co-funding and wage subsidy depends on the size of the company. The share of co-funding of training costs is from 15 (for comp. > 2 500 employees) to 100%. The positive developments of the last two years continued in 2023, with 49 000 employees enrolling in subsidised continuing vocational training. Compared to the previous year, almost 9 000 more enrolments were counted, representing an increase of 23%. Around 22 000 of these enrolments were in qualification-oriented measures (an increase of around 37% on the previous year), as reported in the Berufsbildungsbericht 2024. Source: <https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/k/weiterbildung-qualifizierungsoffensive>

Qualifizierungsgeld (Qualification allowance)

Further training support for employees was further developed with the Act to Promote Initial and Further Training with effect from 1 April 2024 (amending the German Social Code SGB III, § 82a). The existing funding was significantly improved, particularly for small and medium-sized companies. In addition, a qualification allowance was created to support companies and their employees who are affected by strong transformation pressure. The aim is to keep employees in the company through demand-oriented training and to secure skilled labour. The qualification allowance is aimed at employers, their employees and the self-employed who are threatened by job losses due to structural change. The funding of vocational training measures is administered by the employment agencies. Eligible measures may not be predominantly company-specific and must comprise more than 120 hours in total. The providers of the further training measure should be approved. A need for training due to structural change must affect at least 20% of the workforce (10% in smaller companies). The employer must cover the costs without the employees contributing to these costs. The amount of the qualification allowance is based on the net pay difference, with 67% for employees with children and 60% for other employees as benefit rates. Source: <https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/k/weiterbildung-qualifizierungsgeld>

qualifizierungsoffensive

KOMPASS - Compact help for solo self-employed persons

The ESF+ programme KOMPASS of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs BMAS provides financial support for tailor-made continuing education and training measures. The programme is aimed at solo self-employed persons. The funding guideline contains the conditions for support from the KOMPASS programme. To receive the grant, solo self-employed persons must meet the following conditions: full-time solo self-employment as their main occupation, residence and work in Germany, market presence for a minimum duration of two years, employment of a maximum of one full-time equivalent (FTE) employee, no receipt of a KOMPASS qualification grant in the last 12 months, and no “de minimis” aid exceeding 300 000 Euros within a period of three years. Funding is available for training programmes with a minimum duration of 20 hours, which must be completed within six months. What is subsidised depends on the individual needs of the solo self-employed person. These can be business skills, digital skills and methodological knowledge or job-specific technical skills. The solo self-employed person chooses a suitable provider and the appropriate qualification with the support of the COMPASS contact points. Solo self-employed persons receive a financial subsidy of up to 4 500 euros for suitable further training. Source: [Europäischer Sozialfonds für Deutschland - ESF Plus 2021 bis 2027 in Deutschland - KOMPASS - Kompakte Hilfe für Solo-Selbstständige](#)

North Rhine-Westphalia: education cheque (Bildungsscheck) – expired in 2023

According to this regional key instrument, employers with less than 250 employees in North Rhine-Westphalia could apply for the state funded grant (voucher system). Only job-related education and training activities were eligible. The grant was co-financed by the ESF. The co-funding share was 50% of the costs for education and training (max 500 EUR). There was no preferential treatment. Re-use was possible each calendar year. An employer could receive up to ten voucher per year (yet not more than one per employee). A corresponding voucher was available for individuals. For other examples of regional schemes, see 4.1. Source: <https://www.mags.nrw/bildungsscheck>

5.2 Subsidized loans

There are no subsidised loans for enterprises to cover (co-finance) training costs of their employees.

5.3 Tax incentives

In general, training expenses incurred by employers for their employees are regarded as operating expenses (with other expenses such as wages, travel, subsistence, etc.) and, therefore, reduce the taxable income of the company. The deduction of training expenses by employers is not regarded in Germany as a tax incentive in the strict sense.

CHAPTER 6. Other financing arrangements

6.1 Training funds

There are only few examples of **levy-based training funds** in Germany: one in the construction sector (SOKA-Bau) and smaller sectoral funds (e.g. in the scaffolding sector) (Cedefop, forthcoming).

6.2 Training leave

In Germany, there is a right to paid exemption for continuing vocational and political training at federal state level. These **paid educational leaves** (Bildungsurlaub) are available in 14 out of 16 federal states (except Bavaria and Saxony). Depending on the Education Leave Law, there is a right to five days of educational leave per year, or ten days within two years. Educational leaves are aimed at employees. There are special arrangements for public service employees and apprentices. Depending on the respective state regulations, further training must be recognised by the state body (Cedefop, 2024).

6.3 Payback clauses

According to the **payback commitment** (*Rückzahlungsverpflichtung*), employers and employees can agree on a payback clause, with the civil law setting the framework for the agreement. In compensation for employer-provided/financed training, employees commit themselves to stay in the company for an agreed period or (partially) pay back the costs of training. The retention period has to be in proportion to the benefits of training (duration and the level of qualification). The amount to be repaid is reduced on a monthly base. Payback clauses are possible for any type of education. No preferential treatment is applied.

Source: <https://verdi-bub.de/wissen/praxistipps/rueckzahlung-von-fortbildungskosten>

6.4 Preferential tax regimes

According to the **VAT exemptions** included in the Value-Added Tax Act (§ 4 No 21 and 22, Value-Added Tax Act), certain private schools and education institutions are exempted from VAT. The rationale for this special treatment is to prevent distortion of competition, as public education and training in public schools are not subject to VAT. The types of entities supported by this special tax treatment have to fulfil several conditions (Cedefop, 2009, p. 64). Any education/training provider that fulfils the conditions benefits from the exemption, supporting all types of education (including initial education/training and continuing training for employees) offered by eligible providers. The courses are not required to be certified, but the education/training provider has to be acknowledged.

CHAPTER 7. Public sector staff training

According to the Berufsbildungsbericht 2024 (BMBF, 2024a), the highest proportions of employers providing continuing education are found in public administration (71%), education (70%), finance and insurance (70%) and health and social services (67%). In the public sector, there are clear rules for further training, which are laid down in the collective agreement for the public sector (TVöD). According to TVöD, employees are entitled to further training if it is in the interest of the employer. As a rule, the further training must be related to current or future tasks. Civil servants also have similar rights. Further training is often necessary if it is associated with a promotion or special tasks. Participation is coordinated with the employer. There is rarely an obligation to undergo further training, except in special cases. In most cases, participation remains voluntary, but is often recommended when changes are pending.

The further training opportunities in the public sector are diverse and offer suitable options for almost every professional group - whether for a new professional direction, to move up the career ladder or to deepen specialist knowledge.

1. Advanced vocational qualifications (Fachwirt, EQF 6)

A popular option for public sector employees who want to advance professionally is to gain an advanced qualification at EQF level 6 as certified specialist / senior clerk. There are various specialisations, such as the administrative specialist clerk or the senior clerk in health and social services. These further training courses are practical and optimally prepare for management positions or more demanding tasks. They are particularly interesting for those who already have professional experience and want to develop within their field.

2. Part-time studies

Another attractive option is part-time study. Many administrative clerks or employees in similar positions opt for a bachelor's or master's degree in public management or administrative sciences, for example. Part-time courses of study offer the opportunity to acquire an academic qualification while also gaining practical experience. This is particularly valuable for those who want to prepare for higher positions in the public sector.

3. Specialised courses and certificates

In addition to advanced vocational qualifications and study programmes, there are also a variety of specialised courses and certificates that are geared towards specific subject areas. These include, among others, IHK certificates or training in the field of digitisation and IT, which are particularly in demand as the public sector becomes increasingly digitalised. These further training courses often only take a few months and can therefore be easily integrated into your working day.

4. Retraining for career changers

For those seeking a new career in the public sector, retraining is an option. Retraining as an administrative assistant is particularly in demand. Upon successful completion, there are numerous opportunities for entry into various authorities or institutions in the public sector. Career changers from the private sector also benefit from the structured further training opportunities.

In Germany, there are a number of academies and educational centres that are specifically geared towards the needs of public sector employees. These institutions offer in-person courses that often take place alongside employment. They include institutions such as the federal and state educational centres, which cover a wide range of topics, from administration and law to specialised leadership training. Further, platforms such as [Nationales Onlineportal für berufliche Weiterbildung | mein NOW](#) or the e-learning programmes offered by public authorities provide a wide range of further training options that can be completed online. Depending on the federal state, there are different regional providers of further training in the public sector. For example, large cities and federal states such as Bavaria, North Rhine-Westphalia or Berlin have their own training centres for administrative employees and civil servants. These often offer specific courses that are tailored to the needs of the respective state administration. In addition to the state training centres, there are also private providers that specialise in public services. The Academy for Public Administration is one of the better-known private providers. Source: [Weiterbildungs-ABC: Fortbildung im öffentlichen Dienst](#)

As reported in Huismann and Hippach-Schneider (2022), in the legislation of all 16 Länder, there is a continuous professional development (CPD) obligation for teachers. The scope of this obligation varies according to the Länder and the type of teachers and schools. In the city-state of Hamburg for example, VET teachers shall follow CPD for 45 hours per year. Mostly, the head of the school is responsible for the implementation of this CPD obligation for its teaching staff. Each school draws up a CPD plan based on qualification needs assessments and on results of internal or external evaluations. A broad spectrum of VET teaching competences and topics are covered: technical, pedagogical/didactic and transversal. The CPD is offered in different formats, depending on the objectives and needs. However, the preferred formats are half-day CPD on-site (to avoid cancellation of classes), as well as in-process CPD at school, distributed over a school year (e.g. in modular sequential format, i.e. building on each other), allowing time to discuss with colleagues as well as reflection time on the own practice and thus more sustainable. Sometimes the offer is regional or state-wide. Online and blended learning formats are becoming more common, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic. The CPD offer can be provided through different structures but is often organised by federal institutions dedicated to quality development of schools and teachers and subordinated to the respective federal ministry of education. These federal institutions provide guidance to VET schools and teachers on CPD offers, e.g. in North Rhine-Westphalia by 53 local competence teams. CPD can also be organised by the school or close to the school by a local institution, universities, and external providers. The CPD trainers are mostly teaching staff themselves and sometimes, freelance lecturers, increasingly regarding CPD on digital competences. The trainers receive further training for this task or have to prove that they have special qualifications. Cooperation with universities is organised selectively, mostly for selected thematic focal points of CPD for teachers. To ensure the quality of training, feedback forms from participants and trainers are collected and evaluated. In some cases, there is an external monitoring and evaluation of the CPD measure (KMK, 2017).

CHAPTER 8. Current and future role of EU financing

According to the 2024 EC study on EU investment in skills, an estimated EUR 3 171.4 million of EU investments in Germany are supporting skills in the 2021-2027 programming period (most are in ESF+ with EUR 2 999.1 million, 95% of total estimated EU investment in skills). Together with mandatory national co-financing, the total investments available in Germany specifically for skills under the ESF+/JTF/ERDF programmes are estimated at EUR 6 869.5 million. As a proportion of the total budgets in each fund, the estimated investment in skills is highest in the ESF+ (51%), followed by the JTF (6%) and ERDF (1%). The largest estimated shares of investment in skills are in specific objectives focusing on lifelong learning and career transition (77%) and improving education and training systems (67%). In absolute terms, the most substantial investments in skills are estimated for active inclusion and employability (EUR 1 757 million), representing an estimated 52% of the total investments in this specific objective (Jakubowska et al., 2024).

Since general education (including general adult education) is under the responsibility of federal states in Germany, it is important to consider their perspective on EU financing. The EU policy priorities (e.g. the European Year of Skills, and recently, the Union of Skills) in adult learning as well as the financing programmes (in particular ESF+ but also Erasmus+), are part of the discussions, policies on adult learning and their implementation at federal states level. One important national document with the participation of federal states is the National Skills Strategy (Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie). The Länder emphasise in the strategy certain aspects of adult learning, in particular basic skills and literacy, transversal competences as well as low-threshold guidance to increase participation, considering adult learning as a whole and not separated in general and vocational learning. However, employability, competitiveness and in-company further education seem to take centre stage compared to adult education, which might be better represented by ministries for education rather than ministries for employment – on the national and European level.

The Länder have two subjects of concern regarding the financing of adult learning. ESF has reduced its co-financing share to 40% with a respective own contribution of 60%. In parallel, the public support to help cover the own contribution has diminished as well. For adult education centres, for example, submitting an elaborate application for ESF co-funding is not very attractive any more. The second concern regarding financing of ‘general’ adult education in the federal states is of national matter and concerns the status and financing of teaching staff. Indeed, the AL institutions (mostly VHS) are facing shortage of teaching staff, many of whom are freelance (self-employed). The so-called Herrenberg decision of 28 June 2022 and its consequences have aggravated this situation: The Federal Social Court had tightened the requirements for self-employment and thus the obligation of teachers to contribute to the social security funds. As a result of the ruling, many educational institutions found themselves exposed to high additional demands for social security contributions, thereby endangering their existence. At the same time, educational institutions and teachers are complaining about legal uncertainties in the drafting of contracts with self-employed teachers. The German Adult

Education Association emphasises that the many committed self-employed, the vast majority of whom work alongside their main job, ensure the diversity and up-to-date nature of the adult education programme. On 30 January 2025, the German Bundestag passed an amendment that introduced a new section into the German Social Code (SGB IV). It creates a transitional regulation for the compulsory social insurance of teachers until the end of 2026. During this time, freelance teachers and lecturers can continue to be employed as freelance staff, even if a status determination by the German Pension Insurance shows that they are falsely self-employed (Guzetti, 2025).

CHAPTER 9. Data availability, monitoring and evaluation

Indicator-based reporting on continuing vocational training (CVET) in Germany has steadily developed in the past decades. The current situation is reported on at regular intervals, considering various data sources. This is essentially done by the following monitoring reports (see Münchhausen et al., 2023, Fig. 4):

- Report on Vocational Education and Training by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF, 2024a)
- BIBB Data Report for the Report on Vocational Education and Training by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB, 2024)
- National Education Report, written by the Education Reporting Authoring Group (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024a)
- OECD report 'Education at a Glance. OECD Indicators' (OECD, 2024).

The project 'Integrated Continuing Vocational Education and Training Reporting – Development of Systematic Reporting on Continuing Vocational Education and Training (iWBBe)' was carried out by BIBB and DIE on behalf of the BMBF from August 2020 to October 2022. The project report (Münchhausen et al., 2023) provides starting points for achieving improved coherence and thus quality in reporting.

According to the report, in order to make public investment in the CVET sector transparent to the public, it is essential that monitoring reports are published on the distribution of public funding. In addition to the amount of financial expenditure, the main focus should be on providing information about which types of CVET activities and which individuals are the main focus of funding. The BIBB data report is the only one of the four reporting systems considered to provide information on this. For example, it reports on the number of education vouchers issued, approved continuing training grant and upgrading scholarship, AFBG approvals and entries into SGB measures on the basis of programme or administrative data. In some cases, the information is also categorised according to regional or socio-demographic characteristics of the funding recipients. Although this information provides an overview of the extent of funding, it cannot show what proportion of continuing education activities in which fields of continuing education are accompanied by state funding.

With regard to data sources (see also BIBB 2024, Table B-1, pp. 298-299), the AES offers the option of showing the rates of participation in non-formal education activities (in company/outside company) that are fully or partially financed by public funding (a more precise differentiation is not possible). The NEPS also contains similar information. At the company level, the income of companies for continuing education (including in the form of public funding) can be illustrated with the data from the CVTS. Information on the distribution of public funding is contained in the BA statistics regarding SGB II and SGB III, as well as in the AFBG statistics.

In addition to the information on the distribution of public funding, the amount of funding provided by the public sector, companies and individuals for continuing vocational training activities is also of interest. In the reports examined by Münchhausen et al., again only the BIBB Data Report addresses both public and private financial expenditure. Public expenditure is regularly included in the report, with numerous different official statistics and administrative data being used for the compilation (as well as information from the Federal Statistical Office in individual cases for reasons of timeliness). Ultimately, this is an approximate determination of total public expenditure.

The reporting in the BIBB data report is based, among other things, on the federal budget plans and budget calculations, the BA's monthly accounting results for expenditure on continuing education in the legal spheres of SGB II and III, and various official statistics from the Federal Statistical Office (annual accounting statistics, BAföG statistics, school statistics). In individual cases, however, estimates have to be made (e.g. for public expenditure on technical colleges or expenditure on vocational training at adult education centres). In order to be able to read public expenditure on continuing vocational training directly from a single statistic (the annual accounts statistics), it would be necessary to change the functional allocation of expenditure areas (functions plan) in public budgets. The existing lack of clarity in the separation of expenditure on initial and continuing vocational training would also have to be eliminated. Furthermore, tax subsidies for individuals and companies are not recorded in the statistics.

As a short-term measure, Münchhausen et al. (2023) propose the implementation of a digital, interactive 'Continuing Education Dashboard' to improve the availability, findability, and integration of information on continuing vocational education and training (CVET). Further, it might be desirable to differentiate education and learning activities consistently according to the three different forms of formal education, non-formal education, and informal learning, as recommended by the European Union in its Classification of Learning Activities (CLA) (see Eurostat 2016). This would enable more targeted monitoring of continuing education (Münchhausen: in BIBB, 2024, p. 296).

CHAPTER 10. Conclusions

Vocational, work-related, and general further education remain decisive factors for economic stability and social cohesion in Germany. In recent years, the Federal Employment Agency (BA) has significantly expanded its support for continuing education for employees. Besides, recent legislative and reform initiatives, national strategies (National Skills Strategy, NWS), and support programmes (National Decade for Literacy and Basic Education) in continuing education are very much aimed at promoting participation and reducing social and structural disadvantages.

As part of the continuation of the NWS since 2022, the partners have worked to implement the measures they proposed for further developing the adult learning system (see BMAS & BMBF, 2022). In addition, working groups have developed proposals for key topics like: literacy and basic skills; future and key skills (“future skills”); qualification concepts in the technological and ecological transformation; access, counselling, and skills assessment for underrepresented groups; working and employment conditions for continuing education staff (BMAS & BMBF, 2025).

As presented in Chapter 2, recent policy discussions have emerged about establishing an individual entitlement to AL that would extend state support beyond the existing active labour market framework. There are considerations, albeit still at a very early stage of planning, to introduce a national ILA scheme following the council recommendation on individual learning accounts. Such a demand-driven funding instrument could provide low-income individuals with regular entitlements to cover the direct costs of adult learning courses in job-related (non-formal) and general further education. This scheme would aim to open up new flexible training opportunities for low-income earners – those who are in most need to (further) develop professional and future skills – in a self-determined way. During the ILA conception stage, social partners and relevant stakeholders would be involved to ensure an accurate fit of the new instrument within the existing training (funding) system.

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