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## STRATEGIES TO PROVIDE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES TO LOW-SKILLED ADULTS

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### Abstract

The need for adult education and training (AET) is substantial, as labour markets require advanced skills. We used data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) for Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United States (U.S.) to compare participation in AET by high- and low-skilled adults. Additionally, key informant interviews and document reviews were conducted. We found (a) low-skilled adults are less likely to participate in AET; (b) participation in AET is highest among the working population; and (c) non-formal education is often more acceptable to low-skilled adults.

Keywords: Adult education and training, literacy, skill proficiency, nonformal learning

The need for AET opportunities is substantial as adults are remaining in the workforce and living longer, globally. However, AET participation is an issue due to lower personal and organizational resources and varying attitudes toward learning. Low-skilled adults, those who leave initial education training with few formal qualifications (Brown & Bimrose, 2018), are less likely to participate in AET than are adults with higher skills. Strategies to engage adults in AET often exclude and inconvenience low-skilled individuals, employed and unemployed. Engaging low-skilled adult workers is challenging as access, awareness, and program costs associated with AET are barriers. The inequality in AET participation warrants implementation of opportunities and strategies to address challenges low-skilled adult workers and the unemployed face to pursue AET.

### Purpose

This study examines AET participation by low-skilled adults and highlights major barriers to engagement. We share strategies on how to provide AET opportunities to low-skilled adults, using data from five comparison countries. These three questions guided this study: Amongst comparison countries, what differences in AET participation exist based on skill level and employment status? What are the barriers to AET participation amongst low-skilled adults? What strategies are helpful to engage low-skilled adults in opportunities for AET? Answers to these questions can help policymakers understand the importance of offering AET and how different strategies can assist low-skilled adults in taking advantage of those opportunities.

### Methodology

This is a mixed methods study using qualitative descriptive design to analyze documents and key informant interviews. We also use quantitative PIAAC data to show differences in skill proficiency (literacy) levels and AET participation in the five comparison countries.

### Data

Data were collected from 33 key informants through semi-structured, one-hour, videoconference interviews and document review, and included representatives from Canada (n=7), the Netherlands (n=6), Norway (n=6), Sweden (n=7), and the U.S. (n=7). Key informants included AET experts: researchers, educators, policymakers, and government employees; they were recruited by email using purposeful and snowball sampling. Participants provided documentation, including publications, organization reports, and/or government documents to support statements made in the interview.

We examined participation in formal and nonformal AET by both literacy proficiency and employment status for individuals 25-65 years of age across the five countries using PIAAC data.

### Results

Our findings indicate a greater percentage of high-skilled versus low-skilled adults participate in AET. Figure 1 shows, in the U.S., only 27% of adults scoring in PIAAC’s lowest literacy skill level participate in AET as compared to 81% of those with the highest skill levels. Nearly half (49%) of low-skilled adults in Norway participated in AET compared to 78% of high-skilled adults.

From key informant interviews and document review, we identified key barriers for low-skilled adults’ participation in AET: learning histories; a lack of long-term, person-centered support; personal motivation; access; and awareness. Regarding learning histories, several key informants indicated negative experiences with formal learning prevented low-skilled adults from seeking or taking advantage of opportunities for AET. In these cases, informal or nonformal options helped learners develop self-efficacy (Brown & Bimrose, 2018). Multiple key informants mentioned the need for long-term, person-centered support, including assistance with resume writing, a navigation plan, wrap-around services, and an assessment of employment trends and return on investment data for AET. Low-skilled workers may not see the value of AET related to increased income which prevents them from taking advantage of AET opportunities even when available (Brown & Bimrose, 2018; Stenberg, 2011).

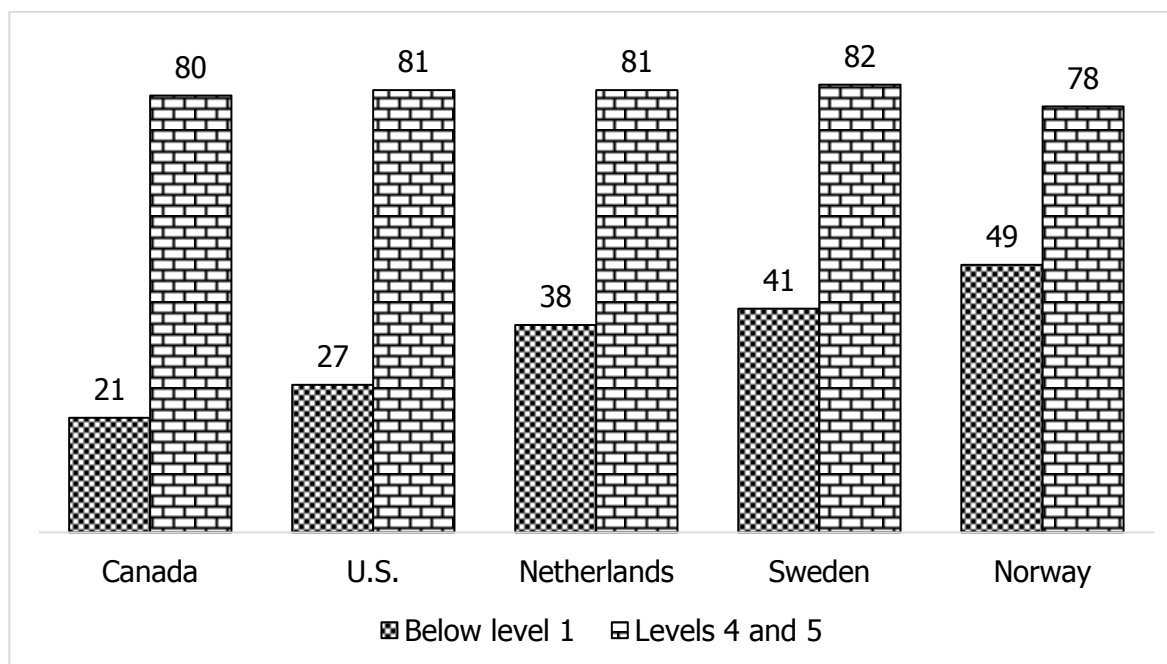


Figure 1: Participation in formal and nonformal adult education and training for adults Ages 25 – 64 by literacy proficiency (percent)

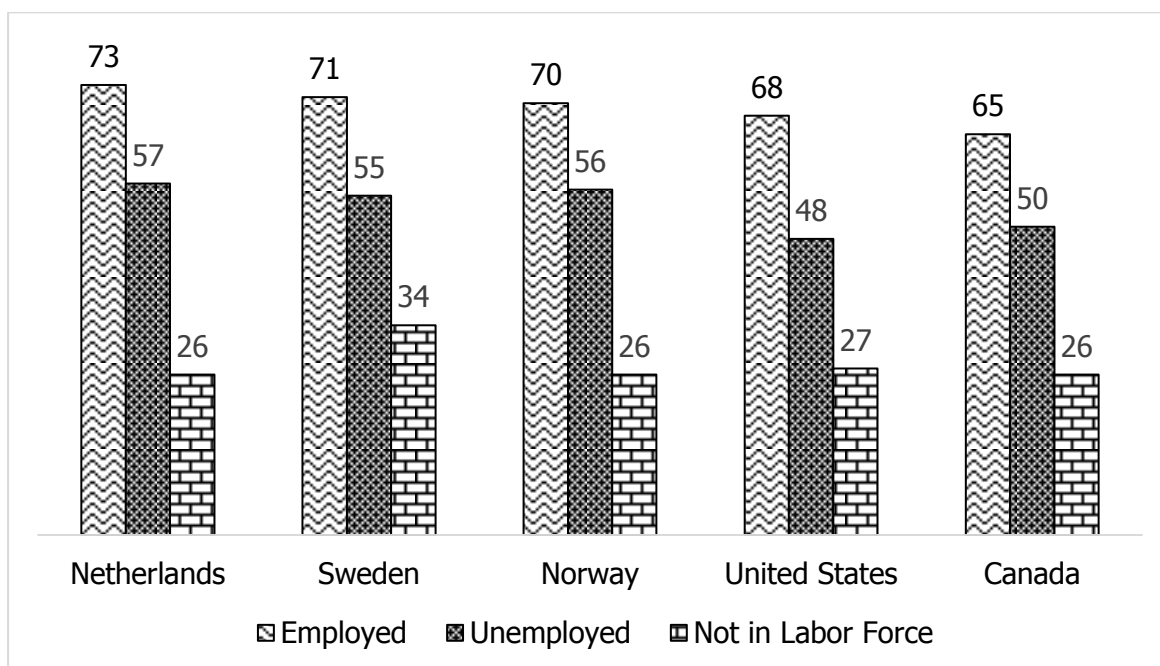


Figure 2: Participation in formal and nonformal education and training for adults Ages 25 – 65 by employment status (percent)

PIAAC data indicate (Figure 2) that, in all five countries, participation in both formal and nonformal AET is highest in the employed population. Strategies to increase AET participation in low-skilled workers include providing support from both managers and co-workers (Sanders, Oomens, Blonk, & Hazelzet, 2011). Access to programs that offset the cost of lifelong education are most often provided by employers (Hyde & Phillipson, 2014), and our findings indicate this funding is often limited, particularly for education not directly linked to the employee’s current employer. This presents a barrier for low-skilled, unemployed, and underemployed workers.

### Conclusions

Low-skilled adults are less likely to be offered opportunities to participate in AET and are less likely to participate even when opportunities are made available. This is due to barriers including previous negative experiences with formal education. Further, low-skilled adults are more likely to be unemployed, making AET opportunities offered by employers inaccessible. Successful strategies include offering informal and nonformal learning opportunities which are often more agreeable to those who have had negative experiences with formal education. In addition, intentional support from managers and co-workers is beneficial.

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