



# HIGH ESTEEM BUT LOW PARTICIPATION

## Strong belief in the value of learning and the pressing need for skills are not enough to motivate adults to participate in lifelong learning

Demographic trends and technological change increase the need for adults to learn and adapt to changing job content and working conditions. Despite this, most EU Member States have consistently underperformed in their efforts to reach targets for adult participation in lifelong learning.

In 2010, the EU set a target of 15% of adults participating in lifelong learning by 2020 <sup>(1)</sup>. Only a handful of Member States met the target; the EU average in 2019 was 11.8%. It fell to 9.2% in 2020, mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To understand these numbers more fully, Cedefop launched a pan-European opinion survey on adult learning and continuing vocational education and training (CVET) in 2019.

The findings show that adults of all ages and across all occupations and qualifications recognise the need for new skills. This need, however, seems insufficient to motivate adults to participate in learning and CVET at the desired levels. Raising adult participation may require new, more learner-centric, policy approaches.

### POSITIVE ABOUT LEARNING AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Cedefop's survey also measured participation in organised work-related learning in the 12 months before the survey. This covers any learning activities that are intended to improve knowledge or skills for work and could be undertaken by adults in work or looking for a job.

Although the data are not directly comparable, Cedefop's survey findings are similar to those of the latest Adult education survey (AES), which was carried out in 2016. Both surveys report that around

38% of adults had participated in learning in the previous 12 months.

This is significantly below the EU's new target, for 2025 <sup>(2)</sup>, of 50% of adults participating in defined formal and non-formal learning activities in the previous 12 months (Table 1). Non-formal learning is learning that is intentional from the employer's point of view, but is not defined by a set curriculum, a duration of time, or location. Typically, non-formal learning is not certified.

### ABOUT THE SURVEY

To find out how people perceive adult learning and CVET, Cedefop's opinion survey comprised 40466 telephone interviews of adults, aged 25 and above, in the European Union Member States <sup>(3)</sup>, Iceland and Norway. The interviews took place between May and July 2019.

The survey defines adult learning and CVET as 'any learning activities undertaken by adults, in a job or not, with the intention of improving knowledge or skills.' 'Opinion' means the perceived value of adult learning and CVET in producing desired outcomes for individuals, society and the economy and for countries. Desired outcomes include skill development, increased productivity and greater social cohesion.

The survey findings are presented in two volumes. The first volume examines perceptions in [Member States](#) and the second the extent to which views on adult learning and CVET are influenced by [demographic and socioeconomic factors](#).

Cedefop's survey clearly shows that low participation is not because adults are negative about adult learning and CVET. On the contrary, it confirms that men and women of all ages and education levels, unemployed or employed in all types of occupations, irrespective of skill level, regard adult learning and CVET

<sup>(1)</sup> The indicator measures the share of people aged 25 to 64 who stated that they had received formal or non-formal education and training in the 4 weeks preceding the survey (numerator). It is based on the [EU labour force survey](#).

<sup>(2)</sup> See [European Skills Agenda](#).

<sup>(3)</sup> The data include the UK, which was a Member State at the time of the survey.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPATION IN ADULT LEARNING; COMPARISON OF EU TARGETS WITH FINDINGS OF 2016 ADULT EDUCATION SURVEY AND CEDEFOP SURVEY

	Objectives for 2025	Current level (latest year available AES)	Cedefop opinion survey
	Participation in formal and non-formal learning aged 25-64	Participation in formal and non-formal learning aged 25-64	Participation in organised work-related learning aged 25+
Participation of adults in learning over a period of 12 months	50%	38% (2016)	38% (2019)
Participation of low-qualified adults in learning over a period of 12 months	30%	18% (2016)	17% (2019)

NB: AES and Cedefop survey findings are not directly comparable. Definitions of adult learning and the countries covered are different in the two surveys.

Source: Cedefop.

as important for finding, performing and progressing in jobs and careers. They also expect adult learning and CVET to become more important in the future and believe that governments should prioritise investment in them. Adults aged 65 and above and retired adults are just as positive about adult learning and CVET as the adult working population, defined as those aged 25 to 64.

Adults believe that there are many opportunities to learn. They also welcome the measures to encourage participation in learning, such as financial incentives, support with childcare and flexible working hours. However, despite positive attitudes, opportunities and support, the main reason adults give for not participating in adult learning and CVET is because they see no personal need.

## PARTICIPATION AND SKILL DEFICITS

Cedefop's survey findings point to skill deficits (Table 2). Participation in organised work-related learning is higher among younger age groups in the working population. The survey found that 57% of 25 to 34 year-olds were either participating in training when surveyed or had done so in the previous 12 months, compared to 33% of those aged between 55 and 64. Despite notable differences in participation in learning between some age groups, around 88% of all age groups in the working population say that they need to keep their skills up to date constantly to do their job.

Participation in learning is much higher among those with a high-level education (52%) compared to those with a low-level education (17%). While it might be expected that 92% of people with a high-level education say that their job requires them to keep their skills constantly up to date, less expected, perhaps,

is that 78% of those with a low-level education say the same.

There are large differences in participation in learning by occupation, ranging from 72% for professionals to 27% for those in elementary occupations. A surprisingly high proportion (64%) of people working in elementary occupations say that their job requires them to keep their skills constantly up to date. This is important as, traditionally, elementary occupations, such as security guards or some care workers, are regarded as unskilled.

Across all age groups in the working population, around 28% say that they lack technical skills and 23% say they lack general skills. Technical skills are those related more specifically to their job or occupation, while general or transversal skills, such as communication, are used across many occupations. Men are more likely to say that they lack general skills.

These findings underline that changing job content is not limited to certain age groups or occupations. They also show that adults least likely to participate in adult learning and CVET – older workers and those with a low-level education or working in elementary occupations – are also those most likely to agree that they lack general and technical skills to carry out their job at the required level.

## NOT IMAGE, BUT CIRCUMSTANCE

Cedefop's survey affirms adults' positive views about adult learning and CVET. It also shows that not enough adults take part in learning and CVET, even though a significant proportion of the adult working population, irrespective of sex, age, education level or occupation, lack certain skills. This indicates that the need to improve skills is not always a sufficient motivation for adults to participate in learning and CVET.

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF PARTICIPATION IN ORGANISED WORK-RELATED LEARNING WITH NEED TO KEEP SKILLS UP TO DATE AND TECHNICAL, AND GENERAL SKILL DEFICITS;SEX, AGE MIGRANT BACKGROUND, EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT % (EU-28, ICELAND AND NORWAY)

	Participation in organised work-related training activity		Your job requires you to keep your skills constantly up to date	To carry out your job at the required level do you lack..	
	Yes, when surveyed	Within the last year		..technical skills	..general skills
			Total agree	Total agree	Total agree
EU-28	16	22	88	28	23
<b>Sex</b>					
Men	16	23	88	29	25
Women	15	21	87	28	22
<b>Age</b>					
25-34	25	32	88	28	22
35-44	21	33	89	29	24
45-54	21	28	87	29	24
55-64	13	20	89	27	24
65-74	5	5	88	29	27
75+	2	2	80	35	27
<b>Migration background (parents born abroad)</b>					
Both	18	24	88	37	33
Only one	15	21	88	29	24
None	15	22	88	27	23
<b>Education level</b>					
Low	6	11	78	35	32
Middle	13	19	85	28	25
High	23	29	92	28	20
<b>Employment status</b>					
Working	24	34	88	28	23
Retired	3	4	Only adults in work were asked these questions		
Students	18	21			
Looking after the home	5	6			
Unemployed and looking for a job	12	13			
Unemployed and not looking for a job	5	4			
<b>Current occupation</b>					
Managers	25	34	91	30	22
Professionals	31	41	94	26	20
Technicians and associate professionals	26	38	93	27	23
Clerical support workers	24	34	86	26	20
Services and sales workers	21	31	83	31	26
Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery	10	30	84	38	36
Craft and related trades workers	16	23	84	33	29
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	13	26	78	27	26
Elementary occupations	10	17	64	31	35
Armed forces occupations	30	43	87	6	17
Other	22	36	88	36	34

Source: Cedefop opinion survey on adult learning and CVET.

Motivation to do something is often linked with some type of reward or benefit. Any decision to take part in adult learning and CVET will partly depend on how likely and how soon the participant will realise the desired benefits. For example, many young people defer entry into the labour market to go into higher education because they believe that, in the longer term, their job will be better and their earnings higher.

Enjoying the employment-related benefits of adult learning and CVET, such as promotion, a new job, or better pay, is not, usually, in the hands of participants, but of employers. Participation in adult learning and CVET is often about potential, not guaranteed benefits. Consequently, participation will be contingent on individual circumstances and not on characteristics such as sex and age.

Aligned with the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), European VET policy aims to help people manage labour market transitions. Such transitions occur to and from work; for example, from learning to work, or from unemployment or inactivity to training or a new job.

Transitions also take place in work, for example as new tasks or attitudes, career progression, or changes of location. Such transitions are unique to individuals, as will be their learning requirements and support needs.

VET policy tends to develop in response to the needs of specific groups, often those affected by high levels of unemployment. But each transition has its unique circumstances; with the continuing digitalisation and greening of European economies, people are expected to experience more transitions during their working lives. Hence, encouraging participation in adult learning and CVET suggests developing a more learner-centric approach to VET.

[Individual learning accounts](#) (ILAs) are a step towards a learner-centric approach. These virtual ‘wallets’ would enable everyone of working age to earn ‘entitlements’, awarded by governments and employers, and ‘spend’ them on learning and training.

But Cedefop’s survey shows that financial support, though important, is not always sufficient motivation to participate in learning. Consequently, as part of a learner-centric approach, ILAs would be integrated with a comprehensive menu of other measures, including guidance to help develop learning and career plans that also align with employers’ needs. Access to accreditation to make learning visible would be another key element of the learner-centric approach, complemented by other types of support, to encourage participation in learning, such as help with family responsibilities. Closer links between initial and continuing VET, with access to different types of learning dependent on need rather than age <sup>(4)</sup>, would also be part of a learner-centric approach.

Participation also needs to be linked with ‘reward’. Not all rewards are financial: different forms of ‘recognition’ for participating in learning can be rewarding and motivating.

A ‘learner-centric’ approach is a partnership with the learner at the centre and where responsibility for learning, and its benefits, are shared. The premise of learning is not to react to a new skill need that has arisen, but a continual process that supports adaptation to changing circumstances and which encourages anticipation and innovation. It addresses individuals’ learning and circumstantial needs and helps them manage the labour market transitions that are particular to them.

<sup>(4)</sup> [The importance of being vocational: challenges and opportunities for VET in the next decade, Cedefop and ETF, 2020.](#)

