

## BRIEFING NOTE

# Encouraging adult learning

Despite improvements, adult learning still needs to become more attractive, inclusive, accessible and flexible

The Bruges communiqué <sup>(1)</sup>, part of the framework for the European Union's (EU's) policy on vocational education and training (VET), set out a vision to make continuing VET (a key part of adult learning) more attractive, inclusive, accessible, and flexible. Agreed in December 2010, the European Commission, Member States and social partners endorsed the communiqué vision in June 2015 in the Riga conclusions <sup>(2)</sup>. So what are the trends in adult learning and what can we do to make the Bruges vision a reality?

## Adult learning: more attractive?

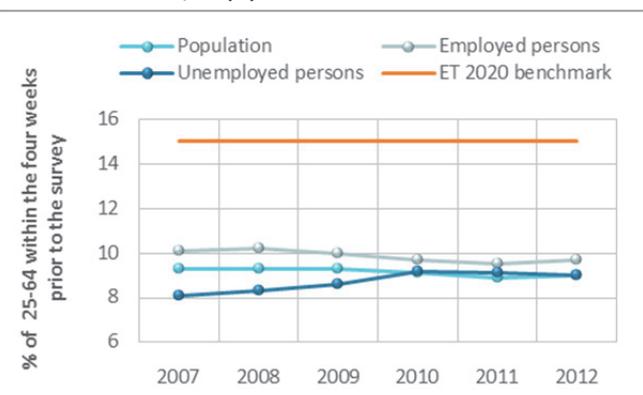
The EU's benchmark for lifelong learning indicates that adult learning is failing to become more attractive. The benchmark, measured by the labour force survey (LFS), is that 15% of adults aged between 25 and 64 should be participating in lifelong learning by 2020. However, the data show participation fell from 9.3% in 2007 to 9% in 2012. Increases to 10.5% in 2013 and 10.7% in 2014, due to a statistical change, are not comparable with previous years and, in any event, remain well below the target (Figure 1).

Other measures of participation in adult learning reveal positive developments. The adult education survey (AES), observed an increase in participation in adult learning from 34.8% in 2007 to 40.8% in 2011. The continuing vocational training survey (CVTS), which measures training in enterprises, also records an increase in employee participation in continuing training courses from 33% to 38% and in guided on-the-job training from 16% to 20% between 2005 and 2010.

<sup>(1)</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/brugescom\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/brugescom_en.pdf)

<sup>(2)</sup> <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/european-ministers-endorse-riga-conclusions-vet>

Figure 1. Participation rates of adults in education/training, 2007-12, EU (%)



Source: Labour force survey, Eurostat.

Comparisons over time are limited and should be treated with caution. Disparities arise because each survey measures things differently (Box), in particular the period in which training takes place and what counts as non-formal learning <sup>(3)</sup>.

Although intentional and structured with the aim of acquiring skills for current or future jobs, job-related non-formal learning often does not lead to a recognised qualification. But non-formal learning matters. Most adult learning in the EU is non-formal, job-related and employer-sponsored. The AES in 2011 found that adult participation in non-formal learning was 36.8% but only 6.2% in formal learning. The CVTS also indicates that much of the learning by employees in enterprises is non-formal. Despite its relevance to continuing VET policies and its statistical importance, guided on-the-job training is not specified in the LFS indicator.

The CVTS also suggests that enterprises are providing more training. Despite the economic downturn, between 2005 and 2010, enterprises' direct expenditure on

<sup>(3)</sup> Cedefop (forthcoming). *Job-related adult learning and continuing vocational training in Europe: a statistical picture.*

training remained stable at 0.7% of total labour costs. Over the same period, working time spent on training increased from nine to 10 hours per employed person, while 'training incidence', the proportion of enterprises providing training, also grew from 60% to 66%. When the economic crisis began, some Member States launched programmes to prevent job losses, including schemes to combine short-time working with training. To what extent enterprises carried out more training due to these schemes is not shown by the data.

Training incidence varies with enterprise size (large enterprises are defined as having 250 or more employees, medium 50 to 249 employees and small 10 to 49 employees). In 2010, participation in continuing training courses was 25% for employees in small enterprises, but 46% for those in large ones. Raising participation in adult learning depends on increasing continuing VET in small and medium-sized enterprises

Box 1. Different surveys on adult learning

The indicator from the labour force survey (LFS) covers all adults aged between 25 and 64 (employed, unemployed and economically inactive). It counts participation in formal and non-formal education and training in a period of four weeks prior to the survey. Within the non-formal component, it considers various types of taught learning activities but does not explicitly include guided on-the-job training. The indicator data is available annually and one of the benchmarks of the EU's education and training 2020 strategy.

The indicator from the adult education survey (AES) covers all adults between 25 and 64 (employed, unemployed and economically inactive). It counts participation in formal and non-formal education and training in a period of 12 months prior to the survey. Within the non-formal component, it counts and explicitly specifies participation in training courses, guided on-the-job training, workshops, seminars, and private lessons. The AES is carried out periodically; the latest surveys were in 2007 (pilot) and 2011.

The continuing vocational training survey (CVTS) covers employees of all ages in enterprises with 10 and more employees in most sectors of the economy (excluding the primary sector, public administration, health and education). The CVTS includes formal and non-formal learning but does not distinguish between them. Its wide definition of learning includes training courses, guided on-the-job training, workshops, seminars, conferences, quality circles, job-rotation, secondments, exchanges and planned self-directed learning. The CVTS is carried out periodically. The latest surveys were carried out in the 12 months of calendar years 2005 and 2010.

and there are encouraging signs. The CVTS indicates that, between 2005 and 2010, training incidence rose from 91% to 93% for large, from 79% to 81% for medium and from 55% to 63% for small enterprises.

### Adult learning: more inclusive?

The EU aims not only to increase but broaden participation in adult learning. In all Member States, younger, more highly qualified adults employed in skilled occupations are most likely to participate in adult learning (Figures 2 and 3).

The AES shows participation in non-formal, job-related learning is some two and a half times higher for employed than unemployed adults (Figure 4). Overall, lower participation in adult learning emphasises inequalities: countries with fewer opportunities for adult learning have the greatest inequalities in access. Comparing the 2007 and 2011 AES surveys, adult learning does not appear to have become significantly more inclusive.

### Adult learning: more accessible and flexible?

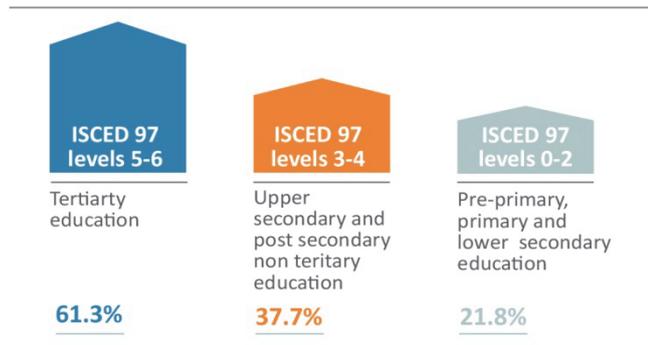
Reducing obstacles to participating in adult learning is a key European policy aim. In 2011, the AES found that the most common obstacles to participating in adult learning were lack of time because of family responsibilities (21%) and conflicting work schedules (18%), followed by costs (13%). The 2011 CVTS also shows that around a third of employers of all sizes that do not provide training declare that they lack time, money or both (Figure 5).

However, the 2010 CVTS found that the main reason quoted by 77% of the enterprises not providing training was because skills matched needs. This can be influenced by whether enterprises see training as a medium- or long-term investment for competitiveness and innovation. A Eurobarometer in 2013 found that 51% of EU enterprises investing in training expect the benefits to last less than two years. An enterprise's production methods and markets also play a role; low skills for highly mechanised, routine production can be found or replaced easily on the labour market <sup>(4)</sup>.

Neither the AES nor CVTS indicate a lack of relevant training provision. The AES in 2011 found only 6.1% of adults saying that no training was offered in the

<sup>(4)</sup> Cedefop (2013). *Benefits of vocational education and training in Europe for people, organisations and countries.*

Figure 2. Participation rates of adults in education and training, by their highest level of education, EU, 2011 (%)



Source: Adult education survey.

reachable distance. The CVTS reported that, in 2010, only around 10% of enterprises could not find the training courses they were looking for.

However, both the AES and the CVTS found little change over time in the type or level of obstacle that people and enterprises faced, implying that accessibility has not changed very much.

There is evidence of flexibility in the type of training provided. More enterprises of all sizes provided other forms of learning. For example, 26% of employees in large enterprises participated in guided on-the-job training in 2010, compared to 21% in 2005, according to the CVTS. For small enterprises, the increase was from 10% in 2005 to 14% in 2010. Although the overall increase is welcome, there is little information on how different forms of learning interact or are combined.

### Adult learning: policies to make it attractive, inclusive, accessible and flexible

The EU's lifelong learning benchmark does not tell the whole story about developments in continuing VET and adult learning. Other surveys indicate some progress, particularly in increasing participation by individuals and provision by enterprises. Following the Bruges communiqué, Member States have reinforced efforts to encourage participation in lifelong learning, including institutional and policy reforms. These changes will take time to have an effect and could bring more positive results. But progress towards the vision of the Bruges communiqué has been limited, not least because, with high youth unemployment, many countries have focused on improving initial VET <sup>(5)</sup>.

<sup>(5)</sup> Cedefop (2015). *Stronger VET for better lives: report on VET policies 2010-14*.

Most continuing VET and other forms of adult learning do not lead to a qualification, which may discourage participation. Opportunities to validate all types of non-formal and informal learning, including that taking place at work, so that it counts towards a recognised qualification and/or other learning pathways could encourage more people to participate in CVET.

Major challenges remain, despite progress in developing validation systems. Many lack awareness of, or access to, validation services. Most validation systems are not comprehensive, but are collections of initiatives and procedures. Many enterprises use validation, but seldom interact with public systems. Consequently, routes to further education remain closed and social recognition of validation is low. To raise its status, learners need more accessible and better guidance services. Continuing VET qualifications also need to be integrated into national qualifications frameworks.

Changes are taking place. Some countries have opened up qualifications to adults that were previously only for young people, for example apprenticeship initiatives in Italy and the UK. Cedefop's recent handbook <sup>(6)</sup> provides policy guidance, outlines success factors and gives examples of good practice to make continuing VET and adult learning more attractive, accessible and of high quality. The conclusions agreed in Riga in June 2015 make improving access to VET and qualifications through better guidance and validation of non-formal and informal learning a policy priority.

Figure 3. Participation of employed adults in non-formal employer-sponsored education and training by occupational group, EU, 2011 (%)



Source: Adult education survey.

<sup>(6)</sup> Cedefop (2014). *Policy handbook: access to and participation in CVET in Europe*.

As outlined in Cedefop's forthcoming report <sup>(7)</sup>, for continuing VET and adult learning to be more accessible, they need to be more responsive to learner and enterprise needs, particularly in terms of timing and format. This argues for training approaches that support individualisation, such as modular courses that sequence learning in ways that allow learners to choose their learning arrangements based on availability and need. Employers can also create learning-conducive work environments through modern work organisation that encourages task variety and complexity, autonomy and teamwork and by using comprehensive, forward-looking human resource strategies that integrate different forms of learning.

Forthcoming findings of Cedefop's European skills and jobs (ESJ) survey, the first pan-European survey on skill mismatch, also emphasises the importance of developing and using employee skills in the workplace. The survey shows that 83% of adult workers (aged 24 to 65) in the EU, whose skills matched their jobs when they were recruited, have seen their jobs become more difficult; 85% have seen their tasks become more varied. However, 25% of adult workers say that they underuse their skills, despite their qualifications matching their job. The ESJ also finds that job stability leads to continued skill formation.

Increasing job-related work-based learning for unemployed adults could help address inequalities. Such arrangements, in the form of apprenticeships and placements, are already common for young people. They could be expanded for unemployed adults as part of active labour market policies. This approach may also align more closely the skills of unemployed adults and labour market needs. It may also give enterprises a source for new recruits <sup>(8)</sup>.

Figure 4. Participation rates of adults in non-formal job-related education and training by labour market status, EU, 2011 (%)

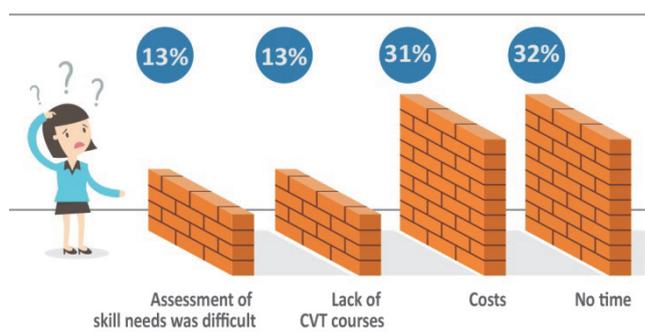


Source: Adult education survey.

<sup>(7)</sup> Cedefop (forthcoming). *Continuing VET in Europe: the way ahead.*

<sup>(8)</sup> Cedefop (2013). *Return to work: work-based learning and the reintegration of unemployed adults into the labour market.*

Figure 5. Obstacles to providing training, EU, (% of non-training enterprises) multiple answers, 2010



Source: Continuing vocational training survey.

Continuing VET and adult learning are delivered by different institutions using various formats and settings. Consequently, changes to make adult learning more attractive, inclusive and accessible require communication, coordination and coherence, at and across national, regional, local and sector levels, involving all stakeholders. Social partners have a key role. They are best placed to encourage learning at the workplace and to arrange work organisation and working time to make participation in continuing VET and adult learning easier.

Developments in adult learning show that, although an important, useful and contemporary indicator, the EU benchmark for lifelong learning should be complemented with more data and analysis from other surveys, to gain better insights on how attractive, inclusive, accessible and flexible adult learning is.

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