



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



ENCOURAGING LIFELONG LEARNING FOR AN
INCLUSIVE & VIBRANT EUROPE

1ST OCTOBER 2016 – 30TH SEPTEMBER 2019

Barriers to adult participation in lifelong learning in a European policy context

ENLIVEN Policy Brief No. 1

January 2019

Sofie Cabus
Petya Ilieva-Trichkova
Miroslav Štefánik

INTRODUCTION

This is the first of two ENLIVEN Policy Briefs exploring the links between “system characteristics” (the relatively fixed features that derive from the institutions that structure particular societies) and adults’ participation in lifelong learning. They are based on two analytical reports focussed on disadvantaged social groups. This Policy Brief explores the *barriers* to lifelong learning participation: what hinders or prevents disadvantaged adult workers from learning.¹

The research reported in this policy brief was undertaken as part of ENLIVEN’s Work Package 4, coordinated by the University of Leuven.

¹ The Policy Brief is based on the first report, S. Cabus, P. Ilieva-Trichkova & M. Stefanik (2018), On the Barriers to Participation of Disadvantaged Adults in Lifelong Learning across 28 European countries (available at: <https://h2020enliven.org>). The second report (Cabus & Stefanik 2018), summarised in ENLIVEN Policy Brief No. 2, looks at the consequences of these barriers for the economy.

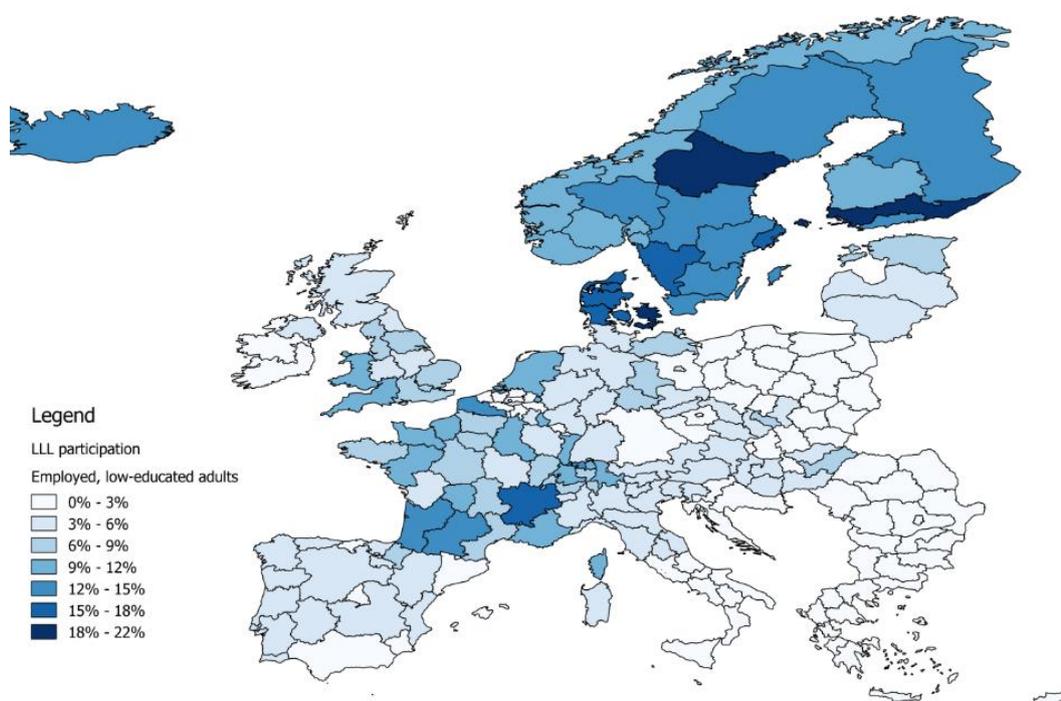
Our approach is innovative. We use a *supra-individual comparative framework* to cover the multiple layers of this complex problem. By doing so, we reveal those barriers (hindrances or “bounds”) that distinguish, across different societies, people who participate in lifelong learning from those who do not. Our research is based on data from 28 European Union member states, along with Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland.

Our empirical framework allows us to focus on European societies at regional level, rather than just countries as a whole. This means we recognise the large variations in participation rates between regions within individual countries (see Figure 1). Participation rates range from 0.7% in Sud-est and Sud-Vest Oltenia (Romania) to 35.6% in Zurich (Switzerland) (Eurostat; [trng_lfse_04]).

In addition, we address the influence system characteristics have across three disadvantaged groups: (a) employed low-educated adults; (b) employed low-educated young adults; and (c) employed migrants. We compare the barriers faced by these groups with those in the employed population overall.

Our main data source is the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU LFS). We processed data for six separate years: 2011 to 2016. EU LFS provides information about *NUTS-2 regions*, and so we have been able to examine the *administrative level* where regional policies are applied.² In addition to the EU LFS data, we have collected variables from Eurostat, the World Bank, UNESCO, and other reliable sources (e.g., Hofstede’s work on cultural dimensions of the value attached to learning). All variables have been gathered in one large database with over 80 variables. (The database is available from the author on request.)

Figure 1: Education and training participation rates among employed low-educated persons aged 25-64

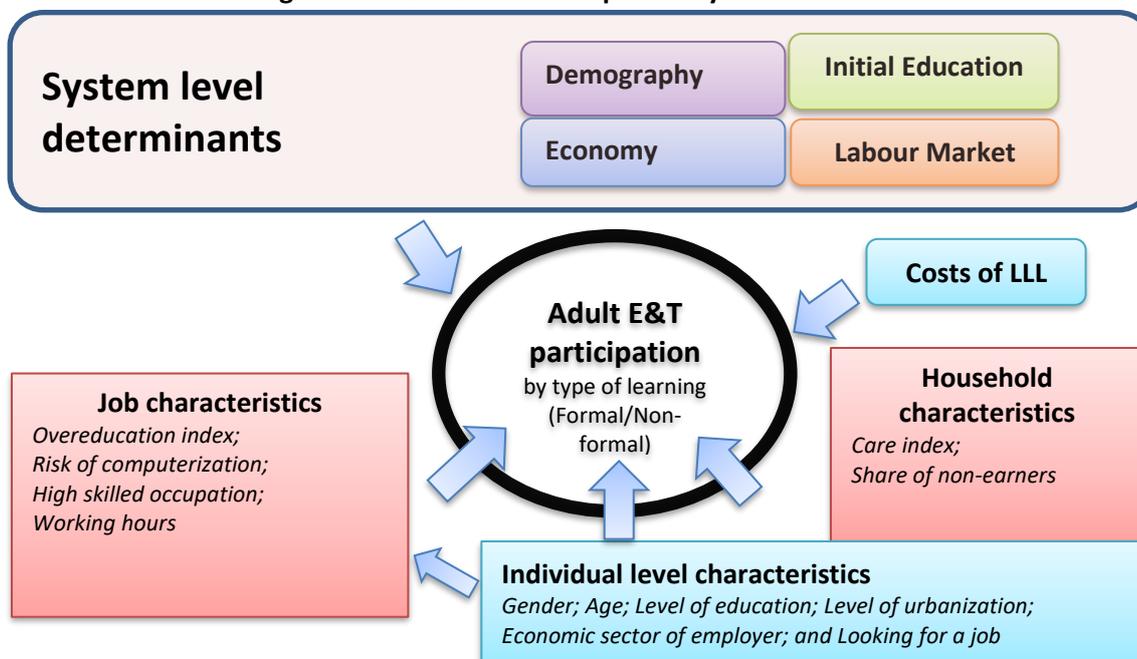


Source: ENLIVEN computation based on EU LFS 2011-2016

² NUTS-2 regions are typically smaller than countries (though in the case of a few small member states, national and NUTS-2 boundaries coincide). Estonia, e.g., comprises a single NUTS-2 region; Germany 38. NUTS is the acronym for Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (French: Nomenclature des unités territoriales statistiques).

Both individuals and societies as a whole benefit from adult education and training: on that the evidence is clear. However, participation in education and training varies significantly not only between countries and regions, but also between individuals, and policies often fail to take account of the real-life facts underlying this. Although we are not the first to ask why some people participate much less than others, our answer is methodologically innovative. Our explanation of variation in lifelong learning participation combines country, regional and individual levels (see Figure 2).³

Figure 2: Overview of the explanatory model



Source: Author.

The main findings are:

1. The organization of initial education shapes adult participation in education and training.

There is a positive association between the age children enter lower secondary education and their participation as adults in formal education and training (lifelong learning). This pattern is observed for all the disadvantaged groups we studied. Entry to secondary education is usually when specialisation begins, and we argue that general skills developed in initial education are potentially important for adults' engagement in formal lifelong learning.

Among low-educated and young low-educated adults, the age a person has left compulsory education increases the likelihood that they will participate in formal lifelong learning as an adult. Among migrants, however, the reverse applies: age of leaving compulsory education is associated with decreased adult participation. (The vocational orientation of a given educational system does not seem to have a significant effect on adult lifelong learning participation.)

2. Higher perceived costs of adult lifelong learning are linked to lower participation in formal learning.

Adults participate more often in lifelong learning when their employers pay for and provide *non-formal* lifelong learning opportunities at work. In contrast, with *formal* adult learning, there is a negative association between the costs of lifelong learning and participation rates among low-educated adults and low-educated young adults. It seems that when adult workers think lifelong learning is costly, they engage less in formal learning, but more in non-formal learning.

³ Results are based on data collected in 2016 from the EU LFS edition 2017. System characteristics were retrieved from online sources, e.g., Eurostat database, World Bank, and UNESCO.

3. Low-educated adults do not see formal lifelong learning as a way of improving their situation.

Employed adults with low levels of educational attainment are less likely to participate in lifelong learning. However, even if they underutilize the education they have achieved in their current jobs, they seldom seek to acquire more through formal adult lifelong learning – for example, to upgrade their qualifications to a higher level. In this they differ from medium- and highly-educated employees.

4. Caring (family) duties limit adult participation in lifelong learning.

When adults have to care for other family members (e.g., young children or seniors) they participate less in lifelong learning. (This is true even after controlling for working hours.) It is thus clear that caring duties directly limit employed adults' participation in lifelong learning. This applies to men and women – and the magnitude is comparable across the two sexes.

5. For employed adults, longer working hours mean less formal learning and more non-formal learning.

Non-formal learning most often happens at work, and the take-up of learning activities is strongly determined by the complexity of the job performed (e.g., health professionals) or job tasks (e.g., supervision). However, people with supervisory work roles are less likely to participate in formal learning.

6. Economic performance matters.

Adult lifelong learning participation does not – contrary to expectation – have an unambiguously positive association with the employment rate. However, there is a clear positive association between overall economic performance and degree of innovation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of our research we make four policy implications:

1. Support inclusive lifelong learning for adults.

While most adult lifelong learning is provided by employers, this is highly selective. Employers tend to provide lifelong learning to employees in more complex and less routinized occupations, and for those who have higher levels of initial education. This further intensifies the inequalities among workers. Those with lower levels of initial education, who work in more routine and less complex jobs, cannot benefit from much of the lifelong learning available.

Public policies should mitigate this polarization. Public support for human capital investment among highly-educated employees may involve high 'deadweight costs' (because employers would provide it anyway). Finding effective ways of involving the lower-educated, and those in less complex jobs, in employer-provided lifelong learning may bring positive economic gains. This is particularly important with growing computerisation of more routine tasks.

2. Actively develop outreach among lower-educated adults: they seldom see further education as a way of improving their life situation.

Those who have received, or achieved, less in their initial education participate less in lifelong learning during their later careers – although they might gain a lot from doing so. If they are in jobs where they underutilize their current education, they seldom seek to improve their situation by further formal learning. Lower-educated people are also more sensitive to higher costs of lifelong learning.

Active outreach among the lower-educated is, therefore, important for distributing publicly-supported adult lifelong learning. At present, this is usually done through active labour market policies. However, the current focus could be broadened from the unemployed alone to those employed in precarious or low-quality jobs (e.g. those at high risk of computerisation, or with poor working conditions).

3. Providing more general skills during initial education improves the inclusiveness of adult lifelong learning.

Ideally, inclusion in education or training should start young, to prevent students from developing negative feelings towards learning. Our research on system characteristics suggests two potential avenues:

- Raise the age when specialization into different educational ‘tracks’ takes place. Our research shows that the age when tracking occurs in secondary education is important.
- Prolong compulsory schooling. Longer compulsory schooling seems to keep the door to formal learning in adulthood open, especially among those who do not achieve higher-level outcomes during their initial education.

The evidence also shows that providing specific (vocational) skills during initial education does not reduce the need for adult lifelong learning. Countries with a higher share of students in vocational programmes do *not* behave differently in adult lifelong learning.

4. Monitoring should focus on regions.

Lifelong learning is high on the Education and Training 2020 Agenda. One of the headline targets is to have 15% of adults aged 25-64 enrolled in formal or non-formal learning. Although the large differences in lifelong learning participation rates among adults between European countries are well known, differences are even larger across European *regions*. Our research, based on detailed quantitative evidence, shows that monitoring should focus on regions in the European context. Regional level information can account for in-country variation in adult participation in lifelong learning. It also addresses the disaggregated level at which educational and labour market policies often take effect.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The ENLIVEN research models how policy interventions in adult education can become more effective. Different work packages focus on the role of governance and policy, participation, workplace learning and adults’ well-being. It implements and evaluates an innovative Intelligent Decision Support System and provides a new and more scientific underpinning for policy debate and decision-making on adult learning, especially for young adults. The project investigates these lifelong learning aspects through quantitative and qualitative analyses.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Encouraging Lifelong learning for an Inclusive & Vibrant Europe (ENLIVEN)
COORDINATOR	Professor John Holford University of Nottingham, Nottingham, England, United Kingdom john.holford@nottingham.ac.uk
CONSORTIUM	3s Unternehmensberatung GmbH – Vienna, Austria Bulgarian Academy of Sciences – Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge – Sofia, Bulgaria KU Leuven/University of Leuven, Leuven – Belgium Slovak Academy of Sciences/ Slovenskej akadémie vied – Institute for Forecasting/Prognostický ústav – Bratislava, Slovakia Tallinn University/Tallinna Ülikool – Tallinn, Estonia Universidad De Deusto – Bilbao, Spain University of Edinburgh – Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom University of Melbourne – Melbourne, Australia University of Nottingham – Nottingham, England, United Kingdom University of Verona/Università degli Studi di Verona – Verona, Italy
FUNDING SCHEME	European Union Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020) – Societal Challenge 6 – Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies", call YOUNG-3-2015, topic "Encouraging Lifelong learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe (ENLIVEN)" Grant Agreement No 693989
DURATION	October 2016 – September 2019 (36 months).
BUDGET	EU contribution: 2 499 788.50 €.
WEBSITE	https://h2020enliven.org/
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Professor John Holford, john.holford@nottingham.ac.uk Contact: Ruth Elmer, ruth.elmer@nottingham.ac.uk
FURTHER READING	Current and forthcoming publications from ENLIVEN that may be of interest to policymakers: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Boeren, E. (2017). Understanding adult lifelong learning participation as a layered problem. <i>Studies in Continuing Education</i> 39(2), pp. 161-175. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0158037X.2017.1310096Boyardjieva, P., & Ilieva-Trichkova, P. (published online, 11 Jan 2017). Between Inclusion and Fairness: Social Justice Perspective to Participation in Adult Education. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i>, 67(2), pp. 91-117. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713616685398Cabus, S.J. & Stefanik, M. (2018). Good Access to Lifelong Learning for the Low-Educated Accelerates Growth: Evidence from 23 European Countries. Available on ENLIVEN website: https://h2020enliven.org and at https://hiva.kuleuven.be/nl/nieuws/docs/hiva-wp2019-01-sofie-cabus.pdfCabus, S.J., Ilieva-Trichkova, P. & Stefanik, M. (2018). On the Barriers to Participation of Disadvantaged Adults in Lifelong Learning across 28 European countries. ENLIVEN Available on ENLIVEN website: https://h2020enliven.org.Räis, M.-L., & Saar, E. (2017). Participation in job-related training in European countries: The impact of skill supply and demand characteristics. <i>Journal of Education and Work</i>, 30(5), 531–551. doi: 10.1080/13639080.2016.1243229