



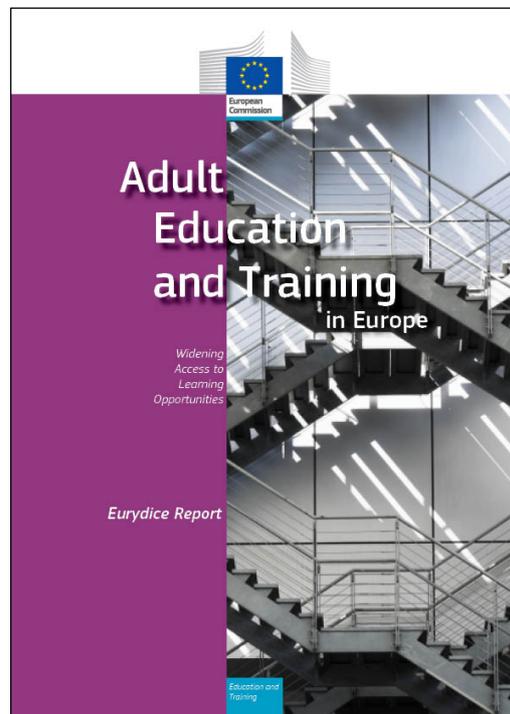
European  
Commission

## What is Eurydice

The Eurydice Network's task is to understand and explain how Europe's different education systems are organised and how they work. The network provides descriptions of national education systems, comparative studies devoted to specific topics, indicators and statistics. All Eurydice publications are available free of charge on the Eurydice website or in print upon request. Through its work, Eurydice aims to promote understanding, cooperation, trust and mobility at European and international levels. The network consists of national units located in European countries and is co-ordinated by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. For more information about Eurydice, see <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice>

## Eurydice Highlights

# Adult Education and Training in Europe: Widening Access to Learning Opportunities



What is the educational attainment of the European adult population? What literacy, numeracy and ICT skills do adults in Europe have? Do all adults benefit equally from available lifelong learning opportunities? Data providing answers to these questions is the starting point for the Eurydice report *Adult Education and Training in Europe: Widening Access to Learning Opportunities* that paints a picture of the state of adult education and training in Europe.

Building on priorities of the renewed European agenda for adult learning (2011), the report concentrates on policies and measures to ensure sufficient access to learning opportunities for adults whose skills and qualifications do not fully correspond

to current labour market and societal requirements. In doing so, the report takes a broad perspective, considering and exploring a range of interlinked areas. Starting from a selection of contextual indicators on adult education and training, the report examines national policy commitments to adult learning, main types of publicly subsidised programmes, learning flexibility and progression pathways, outreach initiatives and guidance services as well as targeted financial support.

The report covers 35 national education systems located in 32 European countries (all EU Member States as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey). It draws on several data sources, the prime source being the information gathered through the Eurydice Network in 2014. Alongside Eurydice information, the report also includes statistical data from international surveys and outcomes from a range of research projects.

These highlights provide a snapshot of selected topics discussed in the report.

## The full study

*Adult Education and Training in Europe: Widening Access to Learning Opportunities* can be found in English on the Eurydice website [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/thematic\\_reports\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/thematic_reports_en.php)

## Printed copies of the report

are available upon request at: [eacea-eurydice@ec.europa.eu](mailto:eacea-eurydice@ec.europa.eu)

## Contact

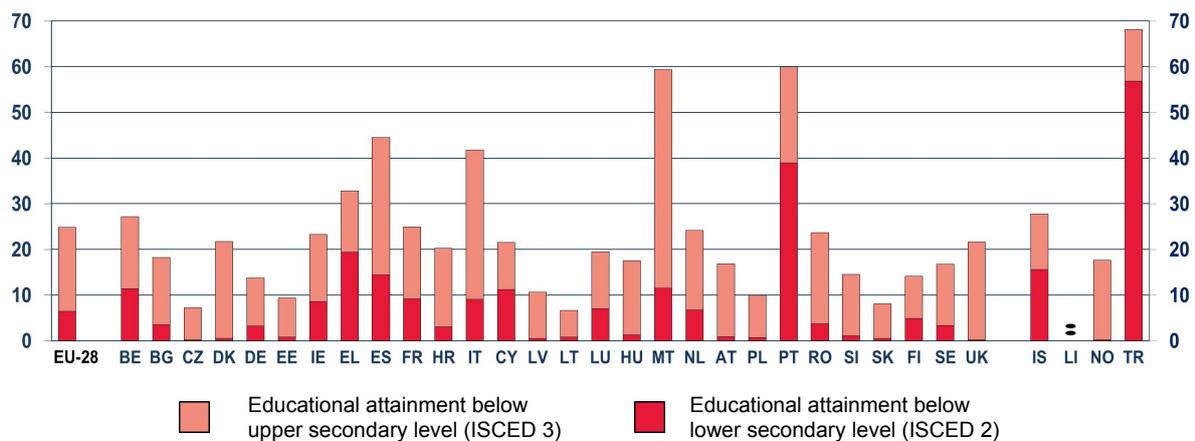
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## Around 70 million adults in Europe have educational attainment below the level of upper secondary education

One way to appraise the knowledge and skills available in the European economy is to look at the educational attainment of the adult population. Available statistics show that around one in four adults aged 25-64 in the EU – that is around 70 million people – have not completed any formal education beyond the level of lower secondary education. This figure includes around 20 million people who left the education

system with no more than primary education. Southern European countries are the most affected by low levels of educational attainment among the adult population. There are also substantial differences between generations, young adults having on average a significantly higher educational attainment level than the older population.

*Adults (25-64) with educational attainment below upper or lower secondary level (%), 2013*



Source: Eurostat (EU LFS).

## Around one in five adults in Europe have low literacy and numeracy skills, and nearly one in three have very low or no ICT skills

Although educational attainment is an important indicator of the human capital in a society, it is not always a valid proxy for measuring skills across different contexts. In particular, skills acquired in the education system may become obsolete if not maintained, or, on the contrary, those with low formal education attainment may gain a range of skills through varied life and work experiences. In this context, the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), which directly assesses skill levels in the adult population (aged 16-65), adds a new perspective to the cross-country comparability of human capital.

On average, across the 17 EU countries that took part in the first round of the survey, 19.9 % and 23.6 % of adults respectively have a low level of achievement in literacy and numeracy. Moreover, both the PIAAC survey and the EU Information society statistics (ISOC) point to the fact that around 30 % of adults in the EU have very low to no ICT skills. Furthermore, the latter source indicates that almost half of all adults in Europe consider that their ICT skills do not fully meet current labour market requirements.

## Adults with the greatest education and training needs have the least opportunity to benefit from lifelong learning

Participation in adult education and training is determined by several factors, in particular educational attainment, employment status, occupational category, age and skills: adults with low level or no qualifications, those in low-skilled occupations, the unemployed and

economically inactive, older people and the least skilled, are less likely to participate in lifelong learning. In other words, the adults most in need of education and training are those with the least access to lifelong learning opportunities.

## **While policy agendas place emphasis on access to lifelong learning for the most vulnerable groups, they rarely specify definite targets to be reached**

Eurydice research shows that support for adults with low basic skills or insufficient qualifications is now commonly integrated into countries' policy agendas, often as a part of education and training policies, but also as a part of wider economic reforms or, more specifically, as a part of employment strategies. However, while policy documents commonly include explicit references to promoting access to education and training for various vulnerable groups of learners, they rarely refer to definite objectives

and targets to be reached. Therefore, even when monitoring and evaluation processes are in place, they do not necessarily address the most important issues affecting people with low basic skills or low level qualifications. This raises the question of whether countries' strategies and policy agendas have a real potential to enhance lifelong learning opportunities for low-qualified adults and other vulnerable groups. The area merits further investigation.

## **There is a range of barriers that may prevent adults from participating in lifelong learning – they deserve policy attention**

The Adult Education Survey indicates that barriers to adult participation in learning are often linked to time constraints, whether due to family responsibilities or to the work schedule, but financial constraints or the lack of the 'prerequisites' (e.g. appropriate entry qualifications) may also prevent people from participating in lifelong learning. Looking specifically at barriers reported by low-qualified adults (i.e. adults with educational attainment below upper secondary level), on average, 21.8 % see their family responsibilities as an

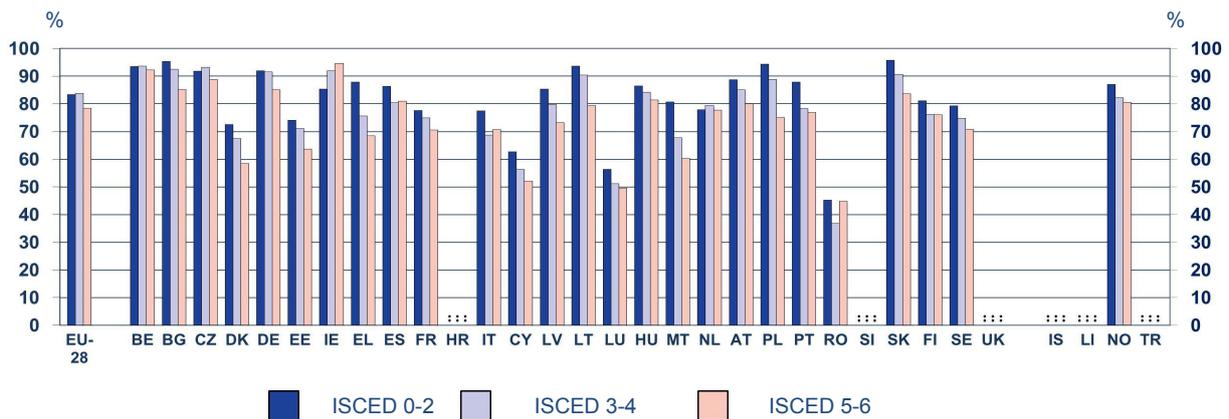
obstacle to participation in education and training, 13.6 % report problems with reconciling education and their work schedule, 13.3 % point to financial issues and 7.1 % raise the issue of insufficient 'prerequisites'. Enhancing flexibility of programmes (e.g. through distance learning, modularisation, alternative entry routes or the validation of non-formal and informal learning) and considering their financial accessibility, are therefore aspects that require policy attention.

## **Reaching out to adults and making them aware of benefits of lifelong learning is one of the key challenges**

Around 80 % of adults who do not participate in education and training do not express interest in becoming involved in organised learning activities. This shows that lack of interest is by far the most common reason for non-participation. In virtually all countries the lack of interest is more perceptible among adults with an educational attainment level below

higher education compared to adults who have completed higher education studies. Furthermore, people with lower educational attainment are less likely to search for information about learning opportunities than people with a higher level of educational attainment.

Adults (25-64) who did not participate in education and training and indicated that they were not interested in participating (%), by highest level of education attained, 2011



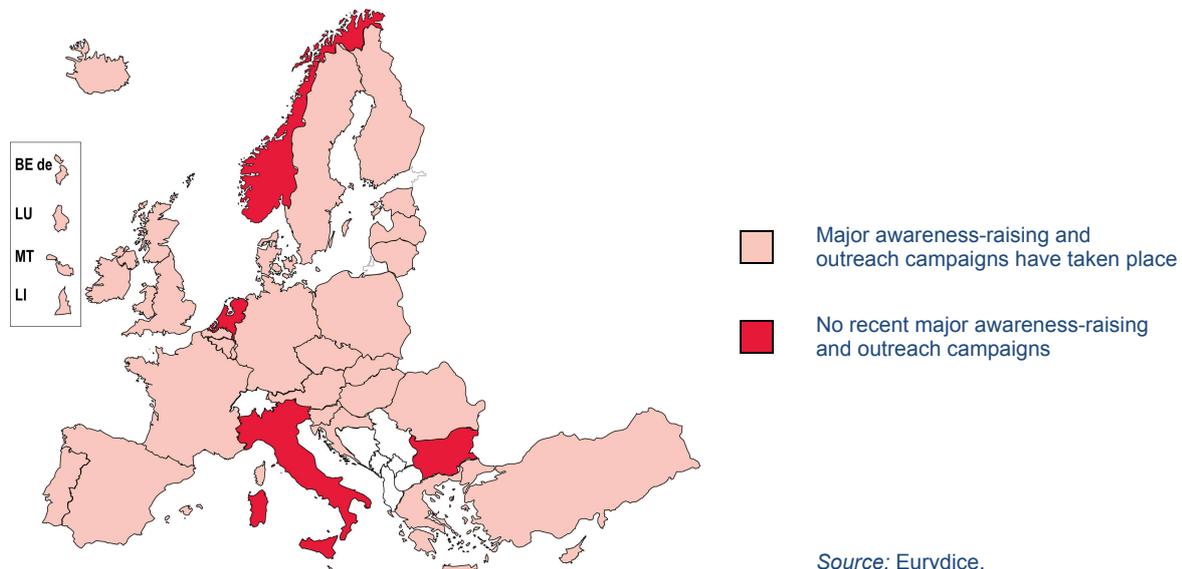
Source: Eurostat (AES).

## Outreach initiatives are widespread, but very little is known about their effectiveness in reaching out to people with low level or no qualifications

Lack of interest in lifelong learning and limited self-directed search for information about learning opportunities indicate a need for efforts to reach out to adults and make them aware of the available learning on offer or enable them to cooperate in creating new provision tailored to their particular needs. Public authorities in most countries are aware of the need to intervene in

reaching out to adults and motivate them to take part in lifelong learning. Indeed, during the past five years, most countries have conducted major awareness-raising and outreach campaigns. However, the impact of these initiatives on the participation of the most vulnerable groups is rarely evaluated.

Awareness-raising and outreach campaigns targeting adults, 2009 - 2014



Source: Eurydice.

The full study *Adult Education and Training in Europe: Widening Access to Learning Opportunities* can be found in English on the Eurydice website: [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/thematic\\_reports\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/thematic_reports_en.php)

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