



Adults in Formal Education: Lifelong Learning in Practice

Throughout the last decade, lifelong learning has occupied a central place in the agenda of European policy cooperation on education and training. Convinced of the importance of adult education and its essential contribution to competitiveness, employability and social inclusion, EU Ministers for Education agreed that at least 15 % of adults should participate in some form of education and training by 2020.

The Eurydice report *Adults in Formal Education: Policies and Practices in Europe* presents the situation following the Action Plan on Adult Learning *It is always a good time to learn* (European Commission, 2007). In particular, the report looks at the Action Plan's objective of providing adults with opportunities to go 'one step up' and upgrade their educational attainment. The report focuses on the opportunities for under-qualified adults to achieve a formal qualification, and it also covers policies and measures for enhancing the participation of adult returners to higher education.

What is Eurydice

The **Eurydice Network** provides information on and analyses of European education systems and policies. It consists of 37 national units based in all 33 countries participating in the EU's Lifelong Learning programme (EU Member States, EFTA countries, Croatia and Turkey). It is co-ordinated and managed by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency in Brussels, which drafts its studies and provides a range of online resources.

All Eurydice publications are available free of charge at

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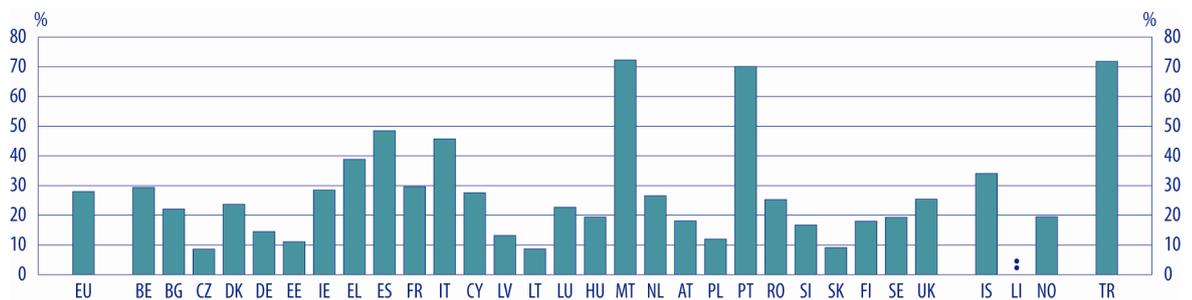


European countries face very different challenges in raising the educational attainment of their adult population

In 2009 there were around 76 million adults in the European Union who had not reached the level of upper secondary education – the level considered a minimum requirement not only for successful labour market entry but also for continued employability. This group included around 23 million adults who had not completed any formal education beyond the level of

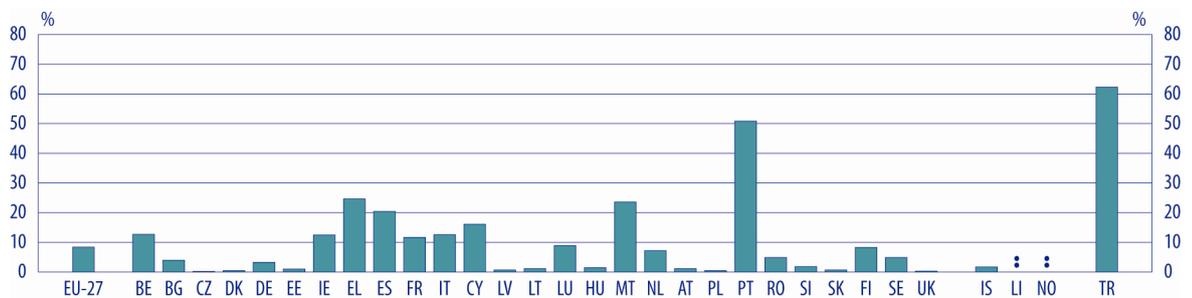
primary education. While in several countries, only a small minority of adults has not completed lower or upper secondary education, some countries have a significant proportion of adults with low educational attainment. Therefore European countries face very different challenges with regard to 'second chance' programmes.

Figure 1: Adult population in Europe with educational attainment below upper secondary level, 2009



Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey – Population: 25-64 years old.

Figure 2: Adult population in Europe with educational attainment below lower secondary, 2009



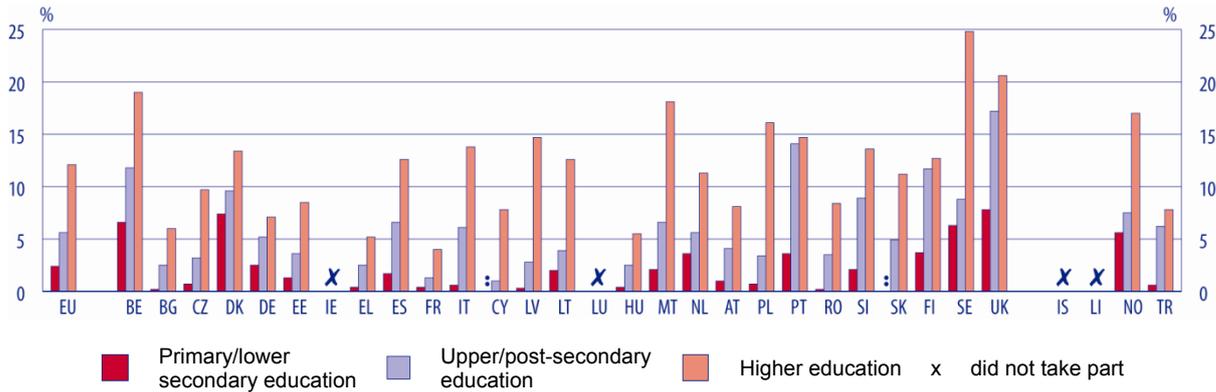
Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey – Population: 25-64 years old.

Less qualified adults are less likely to take part in formal lifelong learning

Those who lack formal qualifications are less likely to take part in formal education than those who have completed at least upper secondary education. This could be partly related to structural barriers in the systems of formal education. In many European countries, adults who have not completed basic or lower secondary education have only very limited opportunities to progress through the formal

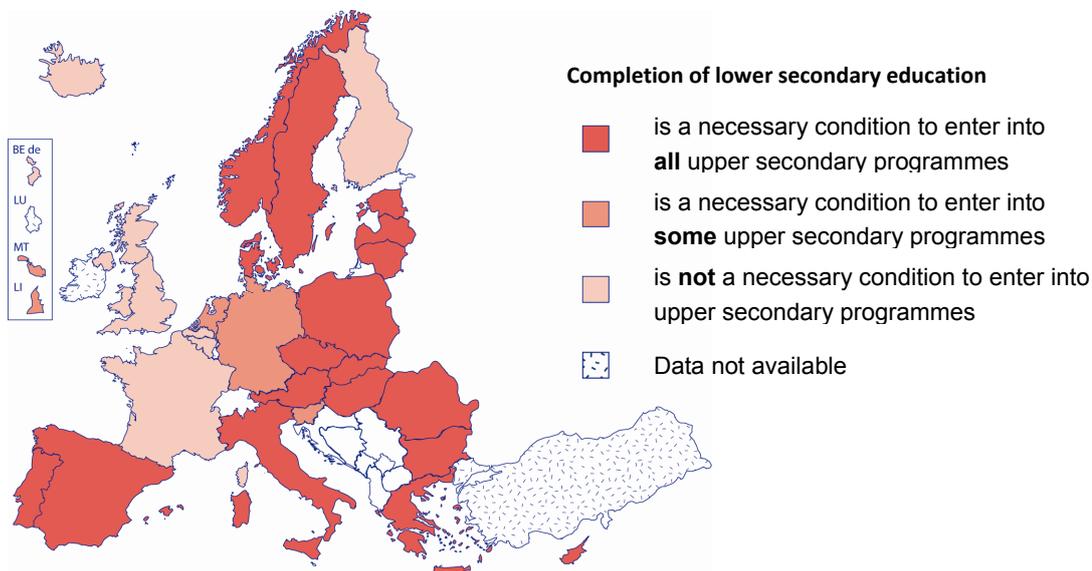
education and training system towards higher qualification levels. To tackle this issue, legislation in some countries ensures that under-qualified adults have access to basic or lower secondary education by requiring local authorities to secure sufficient educational provision to meet demand or by establishing flexible admissions procedures for entry to upper secondary education.

Figure 3: Adult participation in formal education and training by highest level of education attained, 2007



Source: Eurostat, Adult Education Survey, participation the 12 months prior to the Survey.

Figure 4: Completion of lower secondary education as a condition of access by adults to upper secondary education, 2009/10



Source: Eurydice.

Flexibility of provision increases opportunities for adults to achieve formal qualifications

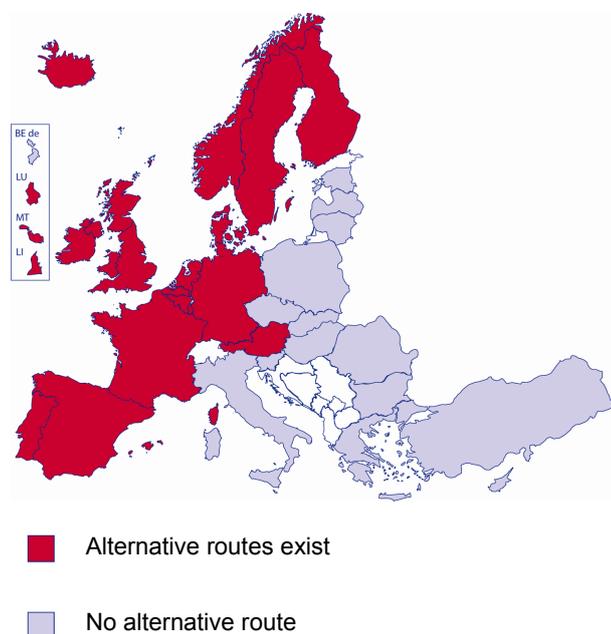
Some countries provide formal education and training programmes in a modular or unit-based structure, which allows students to trace their own learning path and progressively accumulate different qualification components. In addition, in several European countries, mature students can take examinations leading to formal certificates and qualifications without prior participation in education and

training programmes. This allows adult returners to prepare for examinations at their own pace and/or have their learning outcomes achieved in other than formal contexts validated. In the case of vocational qualifications, traditional school-based examinations are sometimes replaced by other evaluation approaches such as portfolios, observation, demonstration, etc. Finally, a few countries appear as important investors in open and distance learning.

Higher education systems vary significantly in their receptiveness towards adult returners

Clear policy objectives regarding the participation of mature students in higher education have so far been defined in only a few European countries. Nevertheless, many countries have put in place various measures that are well suited to the needs of non-traditional higher education candidates and students, including adult returners. For example, in several countries, admission can be based on validation of prior non-formal and informal learning or on specific preparatory programmes rather than on the traditional school leaving certificate. Another possibility is for mature students to be able to validate their prior non-formal and informal learning, including work-related learning, with a view to progressing in their formal higher education studies. Finally, some countries have put in place policy actions and measures to meet the needs of students who cannot follow traditional full-time higher education studies, which is often the case with adult returners.

Figure 5: Alternative routes to higher education for non-traditional candidates, 2009/10



Source: Eurydice.

Financial measures to support the adult participation in formal education and training

Across Europe, direct or indirect financial support for learners is concentrated on the unemployed and those vulnerable to exclusion from the labour market. However, it is difficult to evaluate the extent to which public authorities across Europe ensure that under-qualified adults have sufficient access to appropriate learning provision. In the field of higher

education, some countries fund traditional full-time programmes and flexible learning programmes on an equal footing, in other countries, a different funding method applies to each mode of study. This means that flexible study options often require a more significant private financial investment than traditional full-time programmes.

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The full report

Adults in Formal Education: Policies and Practices in Europe

can be found in English, French and German on the Eurydice website:

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/thematic_studies_en.php

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