

Apprenticeships also played a central role in the Commission's 2020 Communication on Youth Employment Support²¹⁴ which announced a renewed European Alliance for Apprenticeships. The vital role of apprenticeships was also highlighted in the tripartite Osnabrück Declaration (2020) on vocational education and training as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies. Through the renewed Alliance, a wider range of actors will be mobilised, which will help increase work-based learning offers in the medium term.

2.7 Adult learning

In a nutshell

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the already slow progress on adult learning across the EU. Increasing remote adult learning in 2020 may have prevented an even steeper decline in participation rates, but does not change the low average participation rates or the uneven picture across Member States. The pandemic did, however, add momentum to adult learning as a policy objective. Member States agreed on a target of at least 47% adult learning by 2025. A further target of 60% by 2030 was set at the 2021 Porto Summit when the action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights was endorsed.

There have been adult learning targets in previous EU strategic frameworks for cooperation in education and training, but always focused on the narrow window of 4 weeks preceding the survey²¹⁵. Both new targets are based on the participation in learning activities during 12 months preceding the survey that will first be applied in 2022.

The 12-month reference period makes it possible to cover all learning experiences, providing an overview of adult participation in learning closer to today's reality. It has become increasingly common for adults to attend (very) short courses, seminars and other learning experiences, provided in-company, on the market or by authorities at several levels and a wide range of providers, from specialised centres to social partners and civil society organisations. Attendance of such courses may not be accounted for when applying the 4-week window, but the shift to a 12-month window allows for a comprehensive measurement and is likely to capture this type of learning.

As with the EU-level target for work-based learning, the preferred underlying data for the EU-level target on adult learning are not yet available. The EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) will collect adult learning data based on the 12-month window from 2022 onwards, with data available as of 2023²¹⁶. Until then, the EU Adult Education Survey (AES), which uses the 12-month window, can be used – with some caveats²¹⁷ – for provisional indications of country performance and trends.

AES results show a substantial increase in the EU adult learning figure from 2007 (32.8%) to 2011 (40.2%) and more modest progress in 2016 (43.7%). But they also show huge variations between Member States and some major changes over time. For instance, in 2016, nine countries were

and employers throughout the European Union. It recommends that a substantial part of an apprenticeship, meaning at least half of it, should be carried out in the workplace. As the Commission monitoring report of August 2021 (tbc) shows, the seven criteria for learning and working conditions are in place in the majority of Member States. However, as for the seven criteria on framework conditions, further progress in implementation is needed.

²¹⁴ European Commission's [youth employment strategy](#).

²¹⁵ The EU average in 2019, at 10.8%, remained far below the now superseded 2020 target of 15%. Only seven countries had reached the 15% target in 2019 (SE, FI, DK, NL, EE, LU and FR), with AT coming very close at 14.7%. The overall picture is one of big differences between the 27 national situations, in participation rates in any given year and in trends.

²¹⁶ This also means that the LFS methodology, or the EEA target itself, is still up for discussion on the basis of first results in 2023.

²¹⁷ The AES uses a wider definition of adult learning (including guided on-the-job training) than the LFS. Moreover, trend analysis is complicated by numerous statistical breaks in the data series.

above 50% and two were below 20%. Among the countries without statistical breaks in the data series between 2007 and 2016, the greatest increases were observed in Portugal (from 26% to 46%), the Netherlands (from 45% to 64%) and Italy (from 22% to 42%), whereas participation rates decreased significantly in Bulgaria (from 36% to 25%) and Lithuania (from 34% to 28%).

Figure 67: Adults (aged 25-64) participation in learning, 12-month reference period, 2007, 2011, 2016.



Source: Eurostat, Adult Education Survey 2007, 2011, 2016.

Note: Changes over time may be driven by changes to the survey mode, questionnaire, and methodology, in which case Eurostat reports a break in the series (France and Hungary in 2011; Ireland, Luxembourg and Sweden in 2016). See the Eurostat table [trng_aes_100](#) for details.

Adjusting the definition of adult learning to that used in the LFS has only a minor effect on the uneven picture across Member States. For the EU average, the adjustment reduces 2016 adult-learning participation from 43.7% to 37.4%. Relatively low participation during the previous 12 months is also confirmed by findings from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)²¹⁸.

2.7.1 Spotlight on remote learning

Evidence shows that COVID-19 and the lockdown measures resulted in lower adult learning rates in 24 of 27 Member States. For EU27, participation during the previous 4 weeks dropped from 10.8% in 2019 to 9.2% in 2020. Many workers in the hardest hit sectors may have had to switch jobs and would benefit from upskilling and reskilling, but the widespread lockdowns have had a disruptive impact on the organisation of formal and non-formal learning.

As education and training largely moved online, it is worth exploring what this meant for adult learning. The limited evidence available does indeed point to a certain increase in online adult learning²¹⁹.

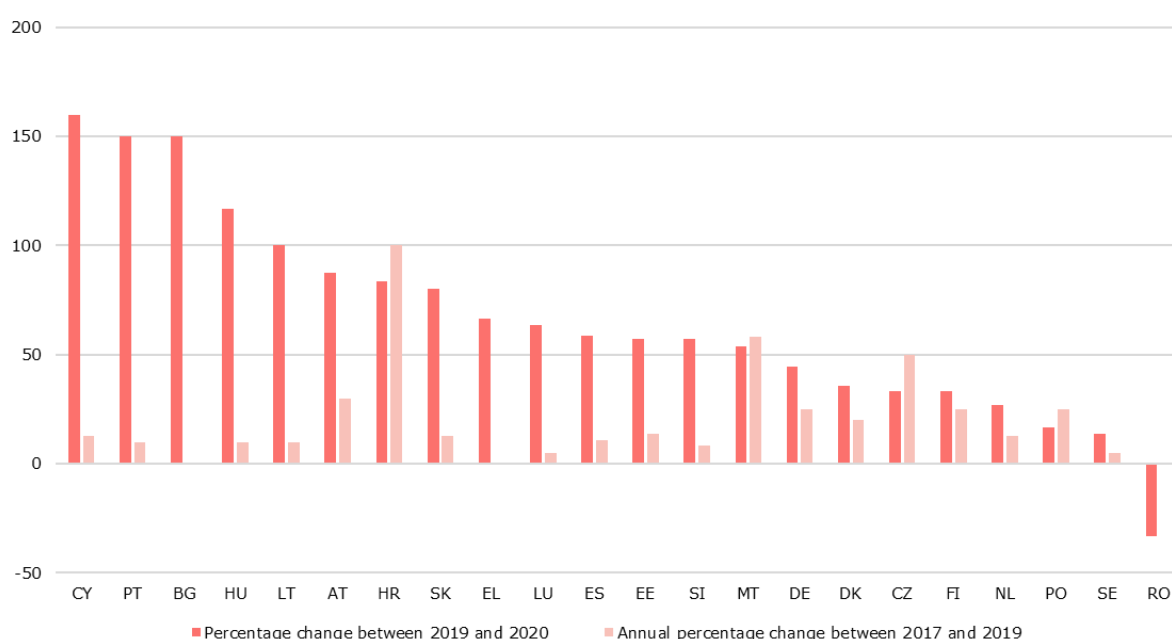
²¹⁸ These results suggest that on average 2 in 5 adults participate in adult learning, with huge disparities between the countries surveyed, from below 25% in EL and IT to above 55% in DK, FI and SE. See OECD (2019), Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC).

²¹⁹ Public employment services have made specific online training programmes available to jobseekers, for instance the French platform *Emploi Store*. In the Flemish Region of Belgium, the number of participants in online training provided by the public employment service (VDAB) after the start of lockdown measures in 2020 was four times as high as in the same period in the previous year. Many countries have focused on helping teaching staff develop online teaching skills, but not all learning translated easily to an online environment. Work-based learning often had to be postponed, although innovative solutions such as virtual internships emerged.

The latest three rounds (2017, 2019 and 2020) of the Eurostat survey on ICT use in households and by individuals provide some insight into online adult learning, as respondents were asked about their participation in online courses (regardless of subject or purpose). For 22 Member States, the comparison between the 2020 data²²⁰ and the previous data highlights the effect of the pandemic (Figure 68). In most countries, the increase in 2020 compared with 2019 was much higher than the year-on-year changes of previous years²²¹.

While this may have prevented a further drop in participation rates, it raises questions about the inclusiveness of adult learning since a sizeable share of adults – those with lower qualifications, lower paying jobs or unemployed – may have poor access to and acquaintance with digital technologies and services.

Figure 68: Percentage change in the proportion of adults engaged in online learning activities in selected EU countries



Source: Eurostat, Survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals, 2017, 2019, 2020.

Note: Data not available for BE, FR, IE, IT and LV. Data partially available for EL and RO.

2.7.2 Policy takeaways

There is scope for further outreach and activation. Policy measures to increase participation need to confront the following status quo: almost all respondents (96%) to a recent Cedefop survey agreed that adult learning and continuing vocational training are important for personal development, and almost as many think such learning is beneficial for career progression and for reducing unemployment²²². 32% of EU adults who wanted to participate in learning but did not mentioned cost as a reason and a further 40.7% mentioned scheduling conflicts, such as difficulties

²²⁰ The participation rate in 2020 varies across countries as much as participation in adult learning in general, ranging from 28% in FI to 2% in RO.

²²¹ The survey on ICT usage suggests faster uptake growth for women, older working-age adults (55 to 65) and low-qualified adults.

²²² Cedefop (2020). Perceptions on adult learning and continuing vocational education and training in Europe, p. 13, Section 3.1.

in receiving time off work. Yet, about 80% of respondents to the 2016 AES²²³ and the 2019 OECD PIAAC²²⁴ who did not avail themselves of in adult learning opportunities in the preceding 12 months declared they were not interested in doing so²²⁵. This points to the importance of integrating financial support to learners with measures that simultaneously tackle non-financial barriers to participation, including a lack of incentives or motivation by individuals to take up training opportunities. Financial support can for instance be provided in the form of training entitlements (including via individual learning accounts) and through paid training leave. To increase incentives, policy measures can increase adults' awareness of own skills needs (e.g. through career guidance) increasing the transparency about available training offers and their quality and recognition on the labour market, and increasing the tailoring of training offers to the heterogeneous needs of adult learners²²⁶.

Upskilling and reskilling the EU's adult population is key for fuelling the digital and green transitions and making sure everyone thrives in the new world of work. These developments, alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, have added momentum to adult learning as a policy objective and have led to new adult learning targets in recent years. The Council has first endorsed a target of 47% adults participating in learning every year by 2025²²⁷ and then a target of 60% by 2030. This was one of the three headline targets presented in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, adopted by the Commission in March 2021²²⁸, which were welcomed by EU Heads of State and Governments during the Porto Social Summit in May 2021²²⁹ and then by the European Council in its conclusions of 24-25 June 2021.

²²³ Eurostat, Adult Education Survey, Eurostat online data code: [TRNG_AES_195].

²²⁴ OECD (2021). [Skills Outlook 2021: Learning for life](#), in particular pp. 134-135.

²²⁵ Educational attainment plays a major role in shaping adult-learning choices: the 2016 AES found that 1 in 5 low-qualified people and 2 in 3 people with a tertiary qualification had participated in learning. Three times as many people in the highly qualified group looked for information on learning opportunities than people in the low-qualified group. Low-qualified adults are also less likely to be aware of and find information on skills development opportunities and may have a negative attitude towards organised learning owing to negative experiences of initial schooling. The OECD PIAAC suggests that adults more familiar with digital technologies are more likely to remain interested in learning throughout their career. The cost of learning is another important factor limiting participation – it was the reason specified by one third (32.2%) of the 2016 AES respondents that did not participate in learning. About as many (31.6%) mentioned family commitments and other personal reasons. For employees, the type and size of employers is a crucial factor, as around 90% of job-related training in the EU is promoted and paid for by employers. Data from EU surveys on continuing vocational training show that the provision of continuing vocational training to workers increases with the size of the organisation: over 90% of large companies (with over 250 employees) provide training opportunities for their employees, compared with 76% of medium-sized firms (with between 51 and 250 employees) and only 57% of small firms (with 11 to 50 employees). More and more workers have atypical employment where this traditional cost-sharing arrangement does not apply.

²²⁶ Cedefop (2020). Perceptions on adult learning and continuing vocational education and training in Europe, Section 4.3.

²²⁷ The 2020 European Skills Agenda proposed several objectives to be achieved by 2025, including that 50% of adults participate in learning every year. This target was calculated using the 2016 AES, removing the share of guided-on-the-job-training, which is included in the definition of adult learning adopted by the AES but not in the LFS. Subsequent methodological considerations meant that the target was revised to 47% by the time the Council adopted the Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) in 2021.

²²⁸ COM(2021) 102 final.

²²⁹ Portuguese presidency of the EU (2021). [The Porto Social Commitment](#).

Box 25: The EU commitment to pursuing the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda

The global community has been pursuing a sustainable development agenda in education established in the Incheon Declaration of May 2015²³⁰ as part of the broader UN 2030 agenda “Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development”²³¹ that was agreed for all 17 policy areas later that year. The sustainable development goal in education, known as SDG-4, is to: ‘Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning’, and in the UN agenda it comprises seven ‘targets’ and three ‘means of implementation’.

In their simplified form, these targets are:

1. free primary and secondary education with effective learning outcomes for all
2. quality early childhood education and care for all
3. access to VET, technical and tertiary education
4. increase in skills
5. elimination of gender disparities in education
6. literacy and numeracy for adults
7. knowledge of sustainable development.

Means of implementation:

1. upgrade education facilities
2. expand scholarships
3. increase the supply of qualified teachers.

The language used by the UN has been different from that of EU policy making. The UN “targets” that required further definition correspond to EU “policy objectives”, while EU “targets” have: (i) a detailed indicator that defines them, and (ii) an agreed numerical value to be pursued by policy.

Over time, UNESCO, the UN agency charged with implementing the SDG-4, has been further developing the above 10 items (‘targets’ and ‘means of implementation’) into global and regional indicators. The UN reports every year on progress towards SDG-4 through the Global Education Monitoring Report²³². While UNESCO has been coordinating the monitoring of SDG-4 on the global level, countries are free to choose their own monitoring methods, which has resulted in many different indicator sets. The EU is using a monitoring system that is inspired by and closely related to the overarching cooperation framework of the European Education Area²³³.

²³⁰ World Education Forum (2015). Education 2030: Incheon declaration and framework for action towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all.

²³¹ United Nations General Assembly (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Resolution A/70/L.1 of 25 September 2015.

²³² See the complete series of Global Education Monitoring Reports.

²³³ For details about EU SDG-4 reporting, consult Eurostat’s SDG Monitoring Reports.