Non-formal learning: Access and validation

Learning happens in different contexts, over the course of a lifetime, following various possible educational paths, as shown in Figure 1. In adult life, learning ranges from programmes that impart basic skills, learning groups engaged in raising awareness on various issues, mature students at university, open and distance learning, on-the-job training, courses that combine theory with practice, and classes or other learning activities taken in pursuit of a special interest. This infographic explains the modalities that non-formal learning takes across Member States.

Examples of non-formal education for adults

In the EU, 66% of companies employing between 50 and 249 employees (Figure 2) offer training at the place of work. Opportunities tend to increase with company size. In fact, continued vocational education and training (CVET) is mainly funded by enterprises, possibly with some public contribution to back up policy priorities, such as extending opportunities to otherwise untargeted audiences. Employers could be motivated to invest to boost productivity, reduce recruitment costs, improve attractiveness and ensure...
better diffusion of in-house expertise. However, there are also costs such as fees, time away from the job and the expenses of dedicated spaces and learning materials. While participants would benefit from the formal recognition of skills gained, some employers hesitate to provide validation following training, to avoid poaching by other companies. Besides work-based training, several Member States help adults with low qualifications to improve their level of education. Figure 3 indicates what Member States offer as basic and initial education for mature learners. Basic skills here refer to literacy, numeracy and digital skills, though other skills may be included in some literature. Initial education courses, on the other hand, lead up to a specific level such as primary and/or lower secondary. Some Member States offer programmes that follow the single structure typical of their schooling system.

Some public authorities use school buildings to host upper secondary courses for adults in the evenings. Others host such courses in separate educational institutions that cater specifically for adults. The latter are often also the most important providers of non-formal education, training and other services such as guidance and validation for mature learners (Figure 4a).

Distance learning allows learners to remain in their own locality. If they engage in e-learning they use ICT supports, but blended learning involves some face-to-face sessions. This is one way of providing adults with flexibility.

In some Member States, there is comprehensive coverage which is publicly subsidised. In others, large-scale programmes promote, coordinate and deliver distance learning. In many Member States, however, distance learning programmes are mostly local and/or privately funded initiatives (Figure 4b).

**Validation**

Within the EU, the validation of non-formal learning is on the increase and, while it is mainly used to provide access to higher education, it can help adults to move from lower secondary to upper secondary education. Validation procedures certify the skills and knowledge that individuals with low qualifications develop in their profession or elsewhere. As Figure 5a shows, Member States have adopted a variety of approaches to the validation of non-formal learning. In some cases, the arrangements are at national level and bring three sectors together: the education system, the labour mar-
Access to further learning

In Europe 6.5% of adults have primary level education at most. As Figure 6 shows, in 20 Member States, they need to complete lower secondary education before they can progress to the upper secondary level, so lack of qualifications can be an obstacle. Among these 20 Member States, seven offer alternative routes to higher education. Where alternative routes to higher education are available, universities may recognise other qualifications, or offer bridging courses (Figure 7 overleaf).

Most Member States offer some programmes with modules and credits. These act like 'building blocks', which is useful for those who find it difficult to finish a course in one go. While higher education institutions use credits, modules are common in continuing vocational education, however the lack of agreement on how much study equals 'one module' hinders recognition.
Figure 8 shows participation in non-formal learning among adults between 25 and 74 years of age. The average for the EU is currently 7.5%. Not all engagement with learning is work related, however one of the starkest gaps in participation rates is the difference between unemployed persons and employed persons, whatever the age group. Cedefop points out the double handicap of unemployed persons, who miss out on opportunities to acquire skills at work or to participate in job-related training. Besides, opportunities are generally reduced for employees at lower levels, those working part-time, those working in sectors requiring low skills intensity, and in small and medium-sized establishments. The EU’s education and training strategy, ET2020, states that every adult should have the chance to learn and train, to obtain and maintain a job or to progress in a career. It also recognises adult learning as essential for personal development and active citizenship. The Commission facilitates a network of national coordinators who exchange best practices on improving access to non-formal learning and its validation.

NOTES and DATA SOURCES
Country codes: AT Austria, BE Belgium, BG Bulgaria, CY Cyprus, CZ Czechia, DE Germany, DK Denmark, EE Estonia, ES Spain, FI Finland, FR France, HR Croatia, HU Hungary, IE Ireland, IT Italy, LT Lithuania, LU Luxembourg, LV Latvia, MT Malta, NL Netherlands, PL Poland, PT Portugal, RO Romania, SE Sweden, SI Slovenia, SK Slovakia, UK United Kingdom.
Learning paths: Authors’ elaboration, Basic and initial education programmes and Structure for adult learning, Medium-sized enterprises offering training, Validation, arrangements and outcomes, Entry routes to adult learning, Entry routes to higher education, Adults in non-formal education.

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