Adult learners in a digital world

What impact does the digital world have on adult learners? Do they need to develop specific skills? Is the internet the new space where adults learn or find learning opportunities? This infographic looks at how adults in the EU currently use the internet, and their level of skills, to identify some of their learning needs. It then focuses on the characteristics of those who seek educational opportunities online to detect gaps in access to learning. Finally, it looks at how many actually use the internet for learning purposes and workplace ICT skills development training to pinpoint learning opportunities.

While policy-makers see the potential of the digital environment to broaden access to education, lack of skills and infrastructure may be barriers in their own right.

The way adults use the internet (Figure 1) reflects their relationship with digital environments, their needs and their skills. The oldest age group surveyed (65 to 74 years) uses the internet significantly less than the rest, but even then, at least a third look for news, goods and services, while close to half use email. Young adults (20 to 24 years) are much more likely to build social or professional networks, look for a job or engage civically or politically online than others. The smallest gaps are those between 20 and 24 years old and 25 to 64 year olds, who seek health information or travel and accommodation services online: 2 pp (percentage points) and 3 pp respectively.

A European Parliament study identifies a number of risks related to these habits and presents some policy recommendations such as education and awareness-raising campaigns to counteract them.

Over half of employees use the internet at work (Figure 2). This EU average hides a gap of 48 pp between Swedes (76 %) and Bulgarians (28 %). On the other hand, 15 Member States (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Malta, Slovenia and the United Kingdom) fall within a bracket of 10 pp difference above or below the EU average.
The digital divide among adult learners

Digital access depends on skills as well as infrastructure. The digital competence framework identifies the key components and areas that describe general digital literacy and skills. This feeds into the new skills agenda for Europe and the goals of achieving high-quality education, media competence and the digital single market. Figure 3 shows two out of five indicators - excluding ‘basic skills’, ‘no skill’ and ‘could not be assessed’ for the sake of clarity. There is a 5 percentage point gap between individuals whose digital skills are low overall (26 %) and those with above basic digital skills (31 %) in the EU. In nine Member States, the percentage of low skilled individuals is higher than those with above basic skills (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Poland and Romania). In Luxembourg, 55 % of individuals have above average skills, the highest score in the EU.

Digital access opens up opportunities for further learning. Looking at the extent to which different groups use the internet for information about education and training reveals gaps which can result in opportunity losses. Age is much more indicative than gender (Figure 4a). Women in the 25 to 54 year old age group have an advantage of 5 pp on men, yet more than a third of both men and women look for learning opportunities online. By contrast, more than half of 20 to 24 year olds use this resource, while only approximately a tenth of those aged 55 to 74 years old do so.

Level of education also has an impact (Figure 4b). While half of highly educated individuals search the internet for learning opportunities, only about a fifth of those with a low level of education, and almost a third of those with a medium level of education do so. Women are at a slight disadvantage among those with a low level of education.

On average, EU citizens in cities (Figure 4c on the next page) are the most likely to seek online information on educational activities (37%) and those in rural areas, are the least likely to do so (26%). This is significant given that internet platforms are often mentioned as a way to improve access to education for those who live in rural areas. This trend is reflected in all Member

Figures 4 a-g: Share of adults using internet to search for information about education or training – % of total, 2015

a. Age and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 to 24 yrs</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 54 yrs</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 74 yrs</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b. Level of formal education and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Data source: Eurostat (isoc_ci_ac_i)
States except for Luxembourg, Malta and Hungary, where those living in towns and suburbs are the most likely to use the service (respectively 63 %, 54 % and 31 %). Nevertheless, while Denmark follows the trend, its lowest percentage (46 %) is higher than the top percentage in 22 other Member States.

On average citizens born outside the EU (Figure 4d) are more likely to seek online information on education (40 %) than citizens born in another EU Member State (36 %) or those born locally (32 %). However, data on Member States show that this is not a consistent pattern. Some countries have the inverse pattern, with the highest percentages being among locals. Examples include Estonia (46 %), Portugal (39 %), Slovenia (32 %), Latvia (31 %), Italy (26 %) and Czechia (21 %).

The EU gap between the lowest earning group (first quartile) and the highest earning group (fourth quartile) is 15 percentage points (Figure 4e). This is interesting, as the internet is presented as having the potential to make education cheaper and therefore more accessible. There are some exceptions. In Finland the top percentage is within the lowest earning group (40 %), followed by the top earning group (34 %). The middle earning groups have similar patterns (third quartile 28 % and second quartile 27 %). Another atypical example is Luxembourg, which only has a difference of six percentage points (from first to fourth quartile: 53 %, 59 %, 59 % and 57 %). Overall, Luxembourg has the highest percentages by household earnings.

Considering occupation (Figure 4f), students seek educational opportunities online most frequently. Scores are very high in Malta (91 %), Estonia (90 %), Latvia (83 %), Spain, Denmark and Luxembourg (81 % each). As many ICT professionals as students look for educational opportunities online in Spain. Croatia is an exception, as ICT professionals are the highest represented group (80 %). Manual workers are the least likely to seek learning opportunities online, with unemployed persons consistently more likely to do so.

Access to technology is also a relevant factor. The top right sector of Figure 4g shows a difference in behaviour of 16 percentage points between those who have internet with broadband access at home and those whose internet access is not broadband. The largest recorded gap is in Croatia (46 percentage points) and the smallest in Lithuania (2 percentage points). The figures for those without broadband access at home are missing for five Member States (Cyprus, Luxemburg, Malta, Slovenia and Finland). Luxembourg (60 %), Malta (59 %), Spain (58 %) and Denmark (56 %) have the highest percentages of people with broadband access at home, searching for educational opportunities online. However, in Denmark 46 % of those without broadband access still seek such information online. This is higher than the percentage with broadband in 21 Member States.

The bottom left sector of Figure 4g shows that mobile internet users are almost twice as likely to seek information on education online (47 % v 25 %). The smallest gap is in Cyprus (33 % v 20 %) and the biggest gap is in Denmark (62 % v 25 %). Malta (70 %), Spain (68 %) and Portugal (65 %) have the highest percentages of mobile internet users looking for information on education. Malta (48 %) and Spain (46 %) also have the highest percentages amongst those without mobile internet who still access information on education online, with only Luxembourg (49 %) surpassing them.
The ‘renewed agenda for adult learning’ (2011) stressed the potential of ICT to motivate adults to take up learning and to reach new target groups, particularly persons with reduced mobility and those living in remote areas. However, unsurprisingly given that they are more likely to look for opportunities online, young people are more likely to engage in learning activities on the internet than older adults (Figure 5). Few countries have comprehensive policies to promote adult learning over the internet. Those that do are also the most successful Member States in encouraging the use of ICT in adult learning.

The workplace is one location where adults can learn and upgrade their ICT-related skills. In the EU, 23% of businesses train their personnel in this way (Figure 6). Finland and Belgium lead this move, with 36% of their firms providing workplace training. Businesses fund most of the training in the workplace, possibly with some public contribution to back up policy priorities. Employers could be motivated to invest in training 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 of skilled staff by other companies.

Figure 5: Individuals using internet for learning activities – 2017

Data source: Eurostat (isoc_ci_ac_i)

Figure 6: Enterprises providing ICT training to their employees – 2018

Data source: Eurostat (isoc_ske_ittn2)