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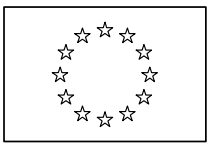

COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

Brussels, 23.10.2006
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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION

Adult learning: It is never too late to learn

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Adult learning: It is never too late to learn

1. Introduction

The Commission's 2001 Communication *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* and the 2002 Council Resolution on lifelong learning stressed the importance of lifelong learning for competitiveness and employability, but also for social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development. Adult learning is a vital component of lifelong learning.

Definitions of adult learning vary, but for the purpose of this Communication it is defined as *all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training*, however far this process may have gone (e.g., including tertiary education).

Education and training are critical factors for achieving the Lisbon's strategy objectives of raising economic growth, competitiveness and social inclusion. The role of adult learning in this context, in addition to its contribution to personal development and fulfilment, is increasingly recognised in Members States' National Reform Programmes. However, with some exceptions, implementation remains weak[1]. Most education and training systems are still largely focused on the education and training of young people and limited progress has been made in changing systems to mirror the need for learning throughout the lifespan. An additional 4 million adults would need to participate in lifelong learning in order to achieve the participation rate of the benchmark agreed by Member States in the framework of the "Education and Training 2010" process.[2] Recent research[3] confirms the importance of investing in adult learning. Public and private benefits include greater employability, increased productivity and better-quality employment, reduced expenditure in areas such us unemployment benefits, welfare payments and early-retirement pensions, but also increased social returns in terms of improved civic participation, better health, lower incidence of criminality, and greater individual well-being and fulfilment. Research on older adults indicates that those who engage in learning are healthier, with a consequent reduction in healthcare costs[4].

This Communication highlights the essential contribution of adult learning, through the acquisition of key competences by all, to employability and mobility in a modern labour market and to social inclusion. It draws on lessons learnt from the dialogue with Member States in the framework of "Education and Training 2010" and from experiences gained in the existing EU education and training programmes, in particular the "Grundtvig" action of the

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1 "Modernising education and training: a vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe - 2006 Joint Interim Report of the Council and the Commission on progress under the 'Education & Training 2010' work programme", http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2006/c_079/c_07920060401en00010019.pdf

2 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/objectives_en.html#measuring

3 *Promoting Adult Learning*, OECD (2005).

4 Tom Schuller, John Preston, Cathie Hammond, Angela Brassett-Grundy and John Bynner, *The Benefits of Learning*, University of London, 2004.

Socrates programme[5]. It also reflects the approach outlined in the Communication on efficiency and equity[6], namely that reforms are possible which make education and training systems both more efficient and more equitable. It recalls that the Structural Funds, and in particular the European Social Fund (ESF), have the potential to support the development of infrastructures and strategies. It underlines the importance of certain specific issues: the gender dimension, in particular regarding data collection, differences in access to lifelong learning and in preferred forms of learning.

It provides the necessary policy underpinning for the implementation of the future "Grundtvig" programme, which will form part of the overall Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013. Finally, it proposes a reflection on adult learning involving Member States and relevant stakeholders, leading to the formulation of an action plan in 2007.

2. The challenges to be faced

Adult learning has not always gained the recognition it deserves in terms of visibility, policy prioritisation and resources, notwithstanding the political emphasis placed on lifelong learning in recent years. This dichotomy between political discourse and reality is even more striking when set against the background of the major challenges confronting the Union.

Competitiveness

Europe's key economic challenge, as set out in the Lisbon strategy, is to raise its growth and employment performance while preserving social cohesion. Rapid progress in other regions of the world shows the importance of innovative, advanced and quality education and training as a key factor of economic competitiveness. General levels of competence must increase, both to meet the needs of the labour market and to allow citizens to function well in today's society. However, there are some 72 million low-skilled workers in Europe[7], one third of the labour force, while estimates show that by 2010 only 15% of newly created jobs will be for those with low skills, and 50% of new jobs will require tertiary level qualifications[8]. In addition, a significant share of the European population still lacks the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities. Ensuring the acquisition of key competences by all citizens remains a challenge for all Member States.[9]. Research shows that an equitable distribution of skills across populations has a stronger impact on overall economic performance.[10].

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5 Report from the Commission "Interim evaluation report on the results achieved and on the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the implementation of the second phase of the Community action programme in the field of education 'Socrates", COM (2004) 153 final, 8.03.2004.

6 Communication from the Commission "Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems", COM (2006) 481 final,8.09.2006.

7 EU Labour Force Survey 2004, Eurostat.

8 *Vocational education and training – key to the future*, Cedefop synthesis of the Maastricht study, Luxembourg, 2004.

9 Commission proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning, COM (2005) 548 final, 10.11.2005.

10 Coulombe, S., J.F. Tremblay and S. Marchand, *International Adult Literacy Survey, Literacy Scores, Human Capital and Growth across Fourteen OECD Countries*, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, 2004.

Demographic change

Europe is facing unprecedented demographic changes that will have a major impact on society and on the economy - and consequently on education and training provision and needs. The European population is ageing: over the next 30 years the number of younger Europeans (up to 24 years) will fall by 15%. One in three Europeans will be over 60 years old, and about one in ten will be over 80[11]. These developments entail serious challenges for the European social model. The reduced flow of young entrants into the labour market and along with the fact that only one in every three persons aged 55–64 years is in paid employment, point to an obvious need to employ the full potential of adult learning with a view to increase the participation in the workforce of young people and extend that of older people. This means in particular addressing the issue of early school leavers (6 million in 2005[12]), while at the same time targeting the improvement of skills and adaptability towards the low-skilled over the age of 40, encouraging them to step up at least one level of qualification.

Adult learning can help ensure that immigration, which has the potential to be a partial counterbalance to an ageing population and to meet skills and labour shortages in certain sectors, can take place in a way that is beneficial to both migrants and the host country. Most new migrants, even high-skilled people, have major needs in terms of language and cultural understanding. In addition, as their competences are often undervalued and under-recognised, their skills may remain underused in the labour market. The labour market status of immigrants, including the highly skilled, is normally worse than the position of EU nationals. This not only applies to the newcomers, but also to second and third generation migrants, and with greater force to migrant women.

Social inclusion

Recent reports confirm that poverty and social exclusion continue to be a serious challenge for all Member States[13]. Different circumstances or conditions, such as low levels of initial education, unemployment, rural isolation and reduced life chances on a wide range of grounds serve to marginalise large numbers of people and to exclude them from the benefits of society and from being an active citizen. New forms of illiteracy in the shape of exclusion from access to and use of ICT in professional and daily life exacerbate this exclusion: adults who are not computer literate are deprived of essential information and facilities which are increasingly only available in digital form[14]. Adult learning has a key role to play in responding to social exclusion.

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11 Data can be fond in: Eurostat Population Projections, 2004 based, Trend scenario, Baseline variant; Green Paper "Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations", Communication from the Commission, COM (2005) 94 final, 16.3.2005).

12 Commission Staff Working Paper "Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training – Report based on indicators and benchmarks – Report 2006", SEC (2006) 639, 16.5.2006, page 40.

13 "Joint report on social protection and social inclusion 2006", http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/docs/2006/cs2006_7294_en.pdf

14 In 2005 in Europe, 37% of people aged between 16 and 74 had no basic computer skills, and the proportion increases with age (65% of people aged 55 to 74). Source: Eurostat, Statistics in focus, issue 17/2006.

3. Taking the adult learning agenda forward

Raising the overall level of skills of the adult population by offering more and better learning opportunities throughout adult life is important for both efficiency and equity reasons given the challenges identified above[15]. Not only does adult learning help make adults more efficient workers and, better-informed and more active citizens. It also contributes to their personal well-being.

One of the main challenges for policymakers in this field is to make optimal use of the diverse learning providers and settings which characterises adult learning systems. Many partners have a stake in policy-making and implementation, including ministries, social partners, public providers, churches, NGOs and regional and local authorities. Political decisions are made at central, regional or local level, and sometimes at different levels concurrently, with many countries showing high degrees of decentralisation[16]. In this context, better coordination and partnerships are vital to improve coherence, avoid duplications and contribute to more efficient spending of the scarce resources. Coordination makes it possible to set priorities, develop consistent policies supported by legislative reforms and ensure implementation. It also contributes to delivering clearer information and guidance to potential learners.

Member States have included plans and policies in their National Reform Programmes to strengthen lifelong learning. A move from planning to action is needed. Implementation can be supported through the use of the European Structural Funds, in particular the European Social Fund, to improve both the infrastructure and the supply of adult learning. There are many examples of good projects which have been developed in the Member States with EU support which could be emulated by others[17].

Member States can no longer afford to be without an efficient adult learning system, integrated into their lifelong learning strategy, providing participants with increased labour market access, better social integration and preparing them for active ageing for the future. They should ensure that they have systems which enable them to define priorities and monitor their implementation.

Key messages

Five key messages for adult learning stakeholders are presented here.

1. Lifting the barriers to participation

Adult participation in education and training remains limited (see Annex). Compared with the benchmark goal of 12.5% participation in adult learning by 2010, the average rate in 2005 was 10.8%. Despite wide variation around this average, ranging from 1.1% to 34.7%[18], there is remarkable similarity across Member States in the *distribution* of adult learning, with those

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15 Communication from the Commission "Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems", paragraph 25.

16 Decentralisation, in different forms and degrees, is in evidence in most countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Romania, UK (Source: OECD 2005; Eurydice 2006).

17 ESF060603-ESF Support to Education and Training Background Document.

18 "Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training – Report based on indicators and benchmarks – Report 2006", pages 35-40, and its Annex "Detailed analysis of progress", chapter 6.2.

with the lowest levels of initial education, older people, people in rural areas, and the disabled being the least likely to participate in all countries. Barriers to participation by individuals may be policy-related; informational (level of access to good and timely information), provider-related (entry requirements, cost, level of learning support, , nature of learning outcomes, etc); situational (the cultural value attached to education; the extent to which the life situation or the family and social environment of the adult supports participation) and dispositional (the self-esteem and self-confidence of the adult as a learner, often linked to failure in previous educational experiences). Demand-side reasons are often the most serious barriers: lack of time, due to work or family reasons; lack of awareness and motivation, as people do not see learning valued or rewarded enough and hence fail to perceive its benefits; lack of information on the supply and lack of financing[19].

The challenge for the Member States is two-fold: to increase the overall volume of participation in adult learning, and to address the imbalances in participation in order to achieve a more equitable picture, by motivating, encouraging, enabling and supporting the adults least likely to participate in learning in all its modes, formal, non-formal and informal[20]. This requires targeted public investment to reach those who have been least well-served by education and training systems in the past.

Motivating people to participate in learning needs to be fostered by improving the quality of information and by exploiting the learning potential of places like community centres, sports clubs, cultural institutions, as well as of institutions of initial education and training.

Message 1
Increasing participation in adult learning and making it more equitable is crucial. All stakeholders have a role to play, but public authorities must take the lead in removing barriers and promoting demand, with a special focus on the low-skilled. This will include developing high-quality guidance and information systems, based on a more learner-centred approach, as well as targeted financial incentives to individuals and support for the establishment of local partnerships.

2. Ensuring the quality of adult learning

Poor quality provision of adult learning leads to poor quality learning outcomes. Quality is multifaceted: information and guidance; needs analysis; relevant learning content matching actual needs and demands; delivery; learning support; assessment approaches; recognition, validation and certification of competencies While recognising that all these dimensions are of importance, the following deserve special attention[21]:

Teaching methods - Teaching methods and materials should take account of the specific needs and learning approaches of adults. Intended learning outcomes should be explicit. In addition, adults must be able to draw on learning support resources such as guidance, literacy provision and the development of study skills as required.

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19 *Lifelong learning: citizens' views in close-up. Findings from a dedicated Eurobarometer survey*, Cedefop, Luxembourg, 2004. The report also shows a strong preference of adults for learning in informal settings.

20 For definitions see "Memorandum on Lifelong Learning" (SEC(2000) 1832, 30.10.2000) and further work as the Classification of Learning Activities by Eurostat.

21 "Adult education trends and issues in Europe", study conducted by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) in 2006. Unpublished.

Quality of staff - The professional development of people working in adult learning is a vital determinant of the quality of adult learning. Little attention has been paid to defining the content and processes for initial training for adult learning staff. There are many educational and professional routes to becoming an adult learning practitioner and the profession is not always recognised within formal career structures. Compared with other educational sub-systems, adult learning is characterised by high percentages of part-time staff (and people working on a voluntary basis), who may have few career prospects and are frequently hourly-paid. Social partners should become involved in the recognition of competences of adult learning personnel.

Quality of providers - The overall quality of providers needs to be addressed through provider accreditation mechanisms, quality assurance frameworks and internal and external monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning outcomes. Governments have a crucial role to play in this respect, by establishing regulatory frameworks, setting quality standards, in particular based on existing examples and principles in vocational education and training, and higher education, and certifying adherence to these standards.

Quality of delivery – Improving the delivery of adult learning is essential to raise participation. Measures to promote effective delivery include availability of learning sites and childcare facilities locally; open and distance learning services for those in remote areas; information and guidance; tailored programmes and flexible teaching arrangements.

Message 2
In order to foster a culture of quality in adult learning, Member States should invest in improving teaching methods and materials adapted to adult learners and put in place initial and continuing professional development measures to qualify and up-skill people working in adult learning. They should introduce quality assurance mechanisms, and improve delivery.

3. Recognition and validation of learning outcomes

A lifelong learning paradigm values all kinds of learning – formal, non-formal and informal. Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning form a cornerstone in the lifelong learning strategy. The learning outcomes should be recognised and valued, regardless of where and how they are achieved. Such recognition of non-formal and informal learning enables learners to identify their starting point, gain entry to a programme of learning at a particular level, achieve credits towards a qualification and/or achieve a full qualification based on competences. It serves to motivate reluctant participants, add value to prior learning and save time and money by reducing or eliminating the need to relearn what has already been learned. Similarly, it enables society to benefit from skills acquired at no public cost.

This emphasis on the recognition and validation is in itself, not new, and Many Member States have already put in place systems for recognition and validation of learning outcomes[22].

In 2004 Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning were adopted by the Education Council[23], to develop trust in such systems.

[22] Source: European Inventory – Validation of non-formal and informal learning, http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/

Nevertheless, the further development of validation methods and systems in the Member States requires the following challenges to be met:

- the introduction of validation must be based on the inclusion of the relevant stakeholders, in particular social partners, in order to promote ownership and credibility;
- the quality of assessment methods, and the institutions applying them, should be improved;
- the objectives of education and training – at all levels – must be reformulated in terms of learning outcomes. This is crucial for validation: as long as objectives are based on input factors, validation is difficult to accomplish.

Message 3
Within the next five years Member States should implement systems for validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning, based on the Common European Principles on validation and recognition and taking full account of existing experiences. Development of validation and recognition may be linked to the development of National Qualification Frameworks within the overall context of the European Qualification Framework.

4. Investing in the ageing population and migrants

Investment is needed for the ageing population and migrants.

Active ageing

The changing demographic situation described above calls not only for raising the average retirement age and but also for "active ageing" policies addressing life both before and after retiring from formal work. The challenge for adult learning systems is two-fold:

- To ensure a longer working life, there is a need for up-skilling and increasing lifelong learning opportunities for older workers. It is widely acknowledged that in order to keep older workers employable, investment is needed throughout the life cycle and should be supported by government, professional bodies and sectors. Special attention should be given to those entering their mid career.

- An expansion of learning provision for retired people is needed (including for instance increasing participation of mature students in higher education), as people are reaching retirement in better physical and mental health, and post-retirement life expectancy is extending. Learning should be an integral part of this new phase in their lives. In its recent Communication on universities the Commission invited universities to "be more open to providing courses for students at a later stage of their life cycle". Such provisions will have a vital role in keeping, retired people in touch with their social environment. In many countries education systems have not yet started to address the emerging needs of this group of citizens, who also have enormous potential in terms of what they can contribute to

[23] http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/validation2004_en.pdf. Certain professions, for which minimum education and training requirements are agreed, are exempt – see Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications, OJ L 255/22, 30.9.2005.

the learning of others. Moreover, the growing numbers of retired people in Europe should be regarded as a potential source of educators and trainers for adult learning.

Migration

As stated before, the challenge for adult learning is to support the integration of migrants in society and the economy, and to make the most of the competences and educational experiences acquired prior to migration. This should involve:

- EU support policies and action through relevant programmes for improving the quality of education and training policies in migrants' home countries, particularly the European Neighbourhood Countries;
- speeding up mechanisms for assessment of capacities and recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning of arriving migrants;
- expanding adult learning opportunities in relation to linguistic, social and cultural integration;
- developing appropriate and effective teaching and promoting more inter-cultural learning.

Message 4
Member States should ensure sufficient investment in the education and training of older people and migrants, but above all ensure efficiency by designing education and training which matches the needs of the learner. They should also raise awareness of the important role of migrants and older people in society and in the economy.

5. Indicators and benchmarks

In order to monitor the multiplicity of adult learning and to develop evidence-based policies, reliable data are required. Compared with compulsory education, data on adult learning are limited, not least because providers are dispersed, of different natures and often operate outside the public sector. Data availability and quality is improving and will continue to do so in the years to come, as a result of existing and forthcoming international surveys. The results of two surveys implemented by Eurostat – the Adult Education Survey and the third Continuing Vocational Training Survey in enterprises – will provide fresh data, mainly on participation of adults in lifelong learning and investment by enterprises and participation in continuing vocational training, by the end 2007. The OECD's survey on adult skills (PIAAC) is currently under preparation.

Further research and analysis is needed and will have a key role to play in making use of the statistics available and in exploring crucial issues like the returns on formal, non-formal and informal learning and the general role of informal learning in adults' lives. More focus on trends and forecasts is needed in order to be able to support policy making and programme design. The Commission also contributes to this through the recent establishment a research unit on lifelong learning at the Joint Research Centre in Ispra.

Message 5
The quality and comparability of data on adult learning must continue to improve. In particular, there is a need for better insight into the benefits of adult learning and the barriers to its uptake, and for better data on providers, trainers and training delivery.

The work of the European Commission in this area, including Eurostat, should concentrate on making the best use of existing surveys and data, on improving the harmonisation of concepts and definitions, and on expanding coverage, frequency and timeliness of data. Reliable gender disaggregated data is required.

4. European Union action

Adult learning has an important role to play in meeting the challenges facing Europe, but its potential is not yet being achieved. The Communication argues that concentrating on quality, efficiency and equity would reap benefits for both society and the economy.

Responsibility in this area lies with Member States. The Commission's role is to support them in their efforts to modernise their systems. The Commission therefore proposes that there should be dialogue with the Member States and relevant stakeholders to explore:

- ways of making the best use of financial mechanisms available at European level (such as the Structural Funds and the Lifelong Learning Programme);
- how to take proper account of adult learning needs in the National Reform Programmes under the Lisbon strategy;
- how best to involve stakeholders to ensure that the messages in this Communication are acted on in the diverse circumstances prevailing in different Member States;
- how to encourage exchanges of good practices through peer learning activities in the framework of the "Education and Training 2010" programme, including on the basis of the results of existing EU programmes;
- best approaches to improve statistical monitoring.

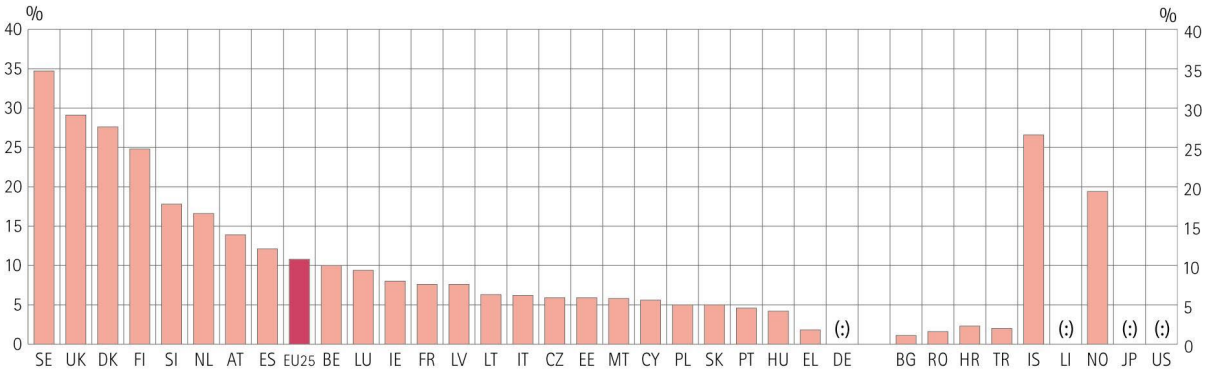
Based on this reflection the Commission proposes to develop an action plan in 2007 to ensure effective follow-up to the messages set out in the present Communication.

ANNEX

Participation in adult learning

Participation of adults in lifelong learning (2005)

(Percentage of population aged 25-64 participating in education and training in four weeks prior to the survey, ISCED 0-6)



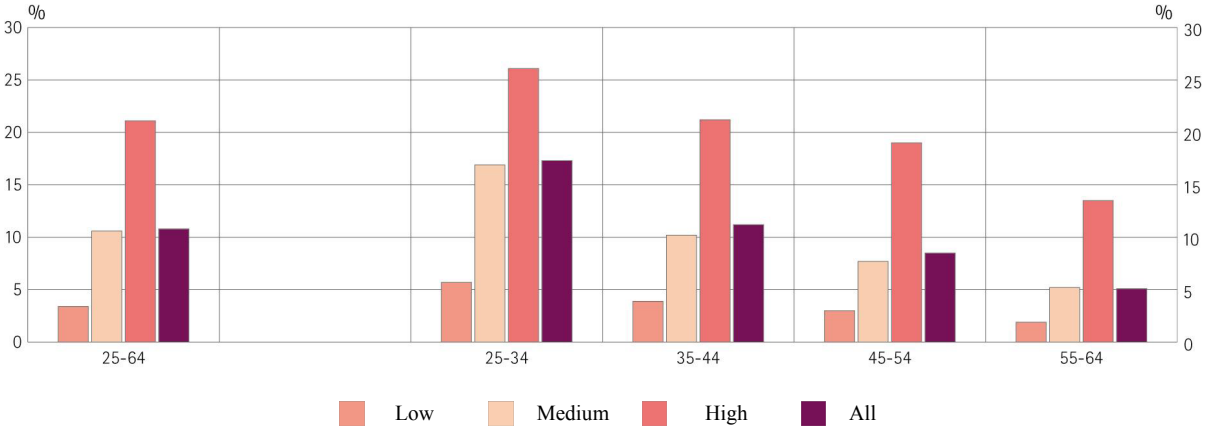
Source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey)

Additional notes:

- DE: data for 2004.

- LU, MT and the UK: provisional data.

Participation in lifelong learning by age and educational attainment (2005)



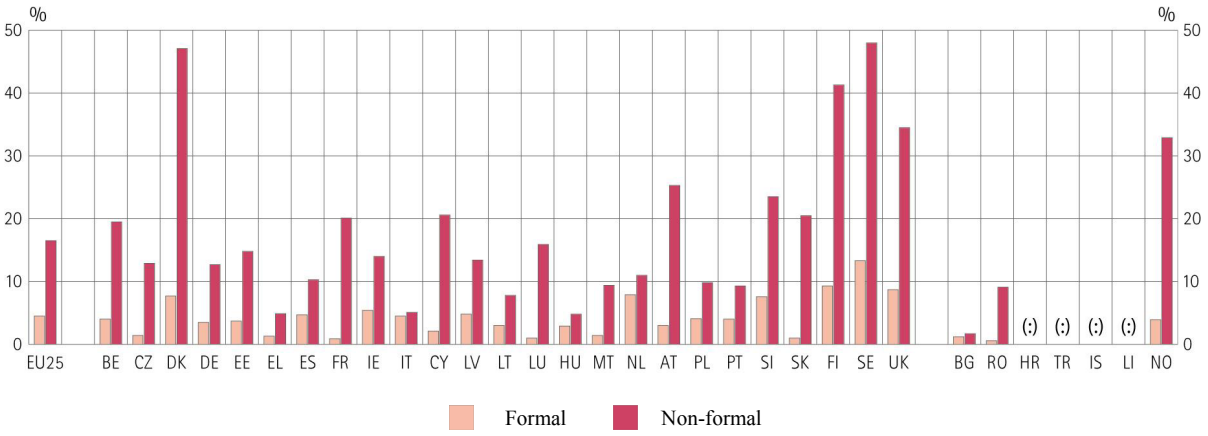
Source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey)

Additional notes:

- DE : data for 2004.

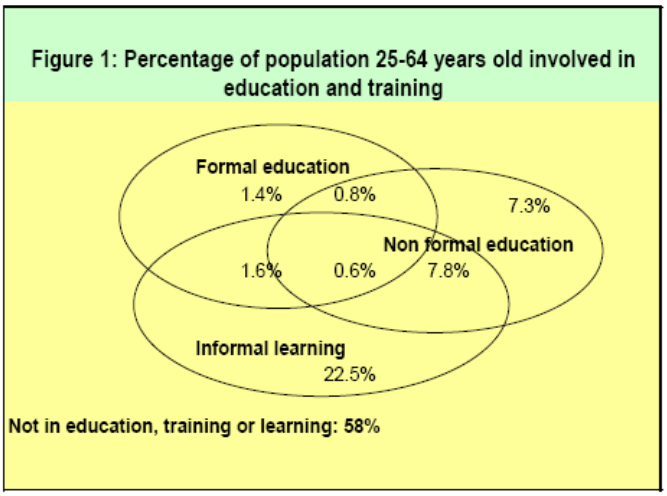
- LU, MT and the UK : provisional data.

Rate of participation (%) of 25-64 year olds in formal and non-formal education and training (2003)



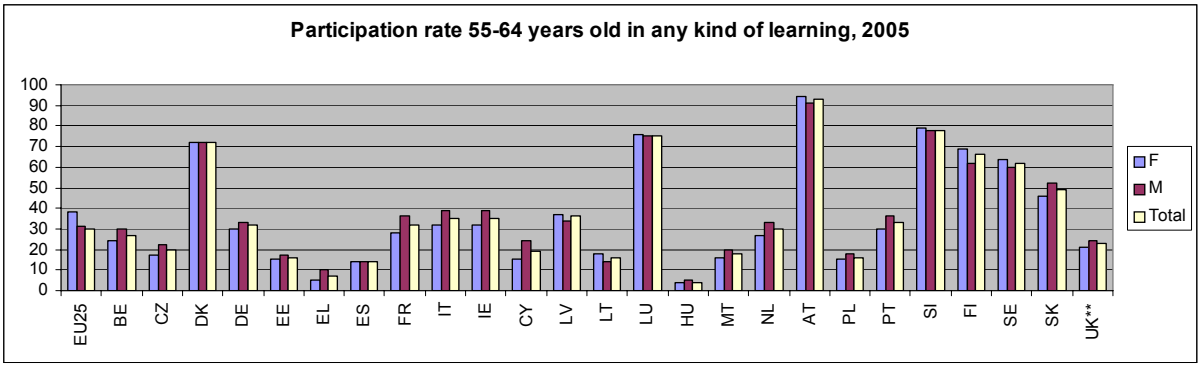
Source: Eurostat LFS, ad-hoc module on Lifelong Learning 2003. Target population: 25-64 years, reference period: 12 months..

Percentage of population 25-64 year olds involved in education and training (2003)



Source:Eurostat LFS, Ad hoc module on lifelong learning 2003
Target population: 25-64 years old

Participation rate 55-64 years old in any kind of learning (2005)



(*)Informal training is not included in UK Source: Eurostat LFS, Ad Hoc module on Lifelong Learning 2003 Target population: 25-64 years old