



Learning begets learning: adult participation in lifelong education

- In Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, more than 60% of adults participate in education and learning, but they are one-third – or below – in Italy, the Russian Federation and the Slovak Republic.
- The more highly educated adults are, the more likely they are to continue with adult education and learning: about 70% of adults with a tertiary qualification participated, compared with just 27% among adults who did not complete upper secondary education.
- Employed adults are more likely to participate in adult education and learning: in half of the countries, the difference in participation between employed and unemployed individuals is more than 15 percentage points.
- Motivation encourages participation in adult education and learning: countries where a significant proportion of adults express a desire for more education also show the highest levels of participation.

Adult learning can play an important role in helping people to develop and maintain key information-processing skills and acquire knowledge and other skills throughout their lives. Workers need to adapt to changes in the course of their careers as the skills demanded by the labour market change. It is thus crucial for adults to have access to organised learning opportunities beyond their initial formal education. Such lifelong learning also contributes to non-economic goals, such as personal fulfilment, improved health, civic participation and social inclusion.

About half the adult population participates in education and learning activities, but the level varies significantly between countries.

The Survey of Adult Skills, a product of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), found that about half of 25-64 year-olds participate in formal or non-formal post-initial education across the 24 national and sub-national entities participating in the survey (see box below). Participation in adult education is positively associated with educational attainment and proficiency levels in key skills. In other words, the higher your level of education, the more likely you are to have access to and participate in adult education and learning activities.

Participation in adult education and learning can be formal, non-formal and/or informal.

Formal education and training is defined as planned education provided in the system of schools, colleges, universities and other formal educational institutions, and which normally constitutes a continuous “ladder” of full-time education for children and young people. The providers may be public or private.

Non-formal education and training is defined as a sustained educational activity that does not correspond exactly to the above definition of formal education. Non-formal education may therefore take place both within and outside educational institutions and cater to individuals of all ages. Depending on country contexts, it may cover education programmes in adult literacy, basic education for out-of-school children, life skills, work skills, and general culture. The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) uses a list of possible non-formal education activities, including open or distance learning courses, private lessons, organised sessions for on-the-job training, and workshops or seminars to prompt respondents to list all of their learning activities during the previous 12 months. Some of these learning activities might be of short duration.

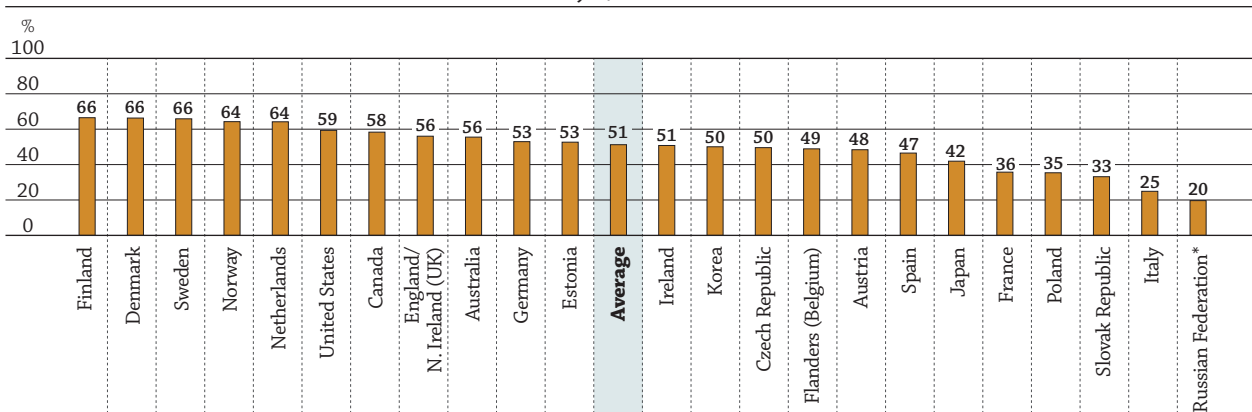
Informal learning (not covered in the Survey of Adult Skills) is never organised, has no set objective in terms of learning outcomes and is never intentional from the learner’s standpoint. Often it is referred to as learning by experience or just as experience. The idea is that the simple fact of existing constantly exposes the individual to learning situations, at work, at home or during leisure time for instance.





As Figure 1 shows, in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, adult participation rates are above 60%. At the other end of the spectrum, one in three adults or fewer takes part in adult learning in Italy, the Russian Federation and the Slovak Republic.

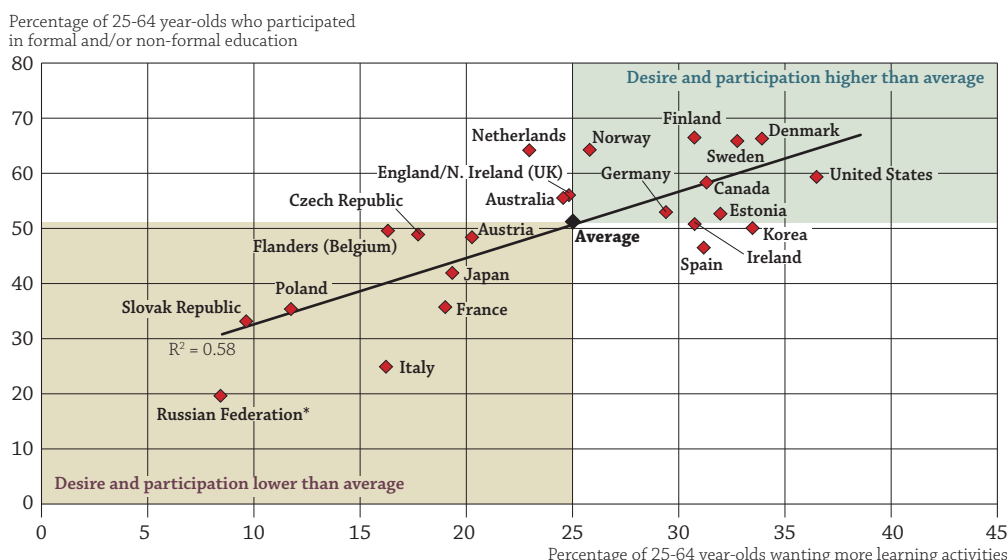
Figure 1. **Participation in formal and/or non-formal education (2012)**
Survey of Adult Skills



* See note on data for the Russian Federation at the bottom of page 4.
Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of 25-64 year-olds participating in formal and/or non-formal education.
Source: OECD (2014), *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, Indicator C6 (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).

Low levels of participation can be related to different structural barriers such as lack of time due to overloaded work schedules, childcare or family responsibilities, or the difficulties of combining (often not very flexible) learning opportunities with the challenges of work-family time patterns. However, the survey results suggest that a lack of desire for more education is more strongly related to lower participation than these structural barriers (Figure 2). In other words, before looking at the structural barriers to participation in adult learning, efforts should be made towards promoting a culture of continuous learning.

Figure 2. **Relationship between participation and desire for more formal and/or non-formal education among 25-64 year-olds (2012)**
Survey of Adult Skills



* See note on data for the Russian Federation at the bottom of page 4.
Source: OECD (2014), *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, Indicator C6 (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).



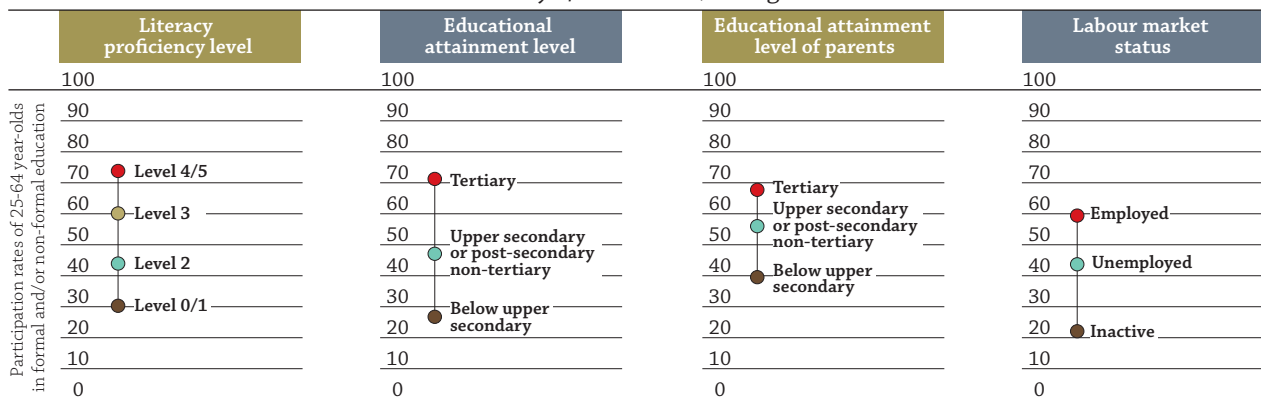
Countries in the top right quadrant of Figure 2 show both a higher participation in adult education and learning activities and a higher level of desire for more education and learning activities than the average. For example, Denmark has the second-highest participation level and is also among those countries where more than one-third of adults expressed a need for more education and learning activities. In the lower left quadrant are countries where both participation and desire are lower than the average. For example, in Italy only one-quarter of adults participated in education and learning activities and less than 20% expressed a need for more education and learning activities. Figure 2 also shows that in some countries on the right of the regression line, there is some unmet demand. This is the case in Spain even though the desire for more learning activities is higher than the average. Conversely, in countries on the left of the regression line like the Netherlands, the supply structure is attractive enough even for adults with moderate levels of motivation.

Participation in adult education is highly skewed towards the employed and the skilled.

Results from the Survey of Adult Skills demonstrate that participation in education is strongly related to proficiency levels in literacy, educational attainment and labour market status (Figure 3).

Figure 3. **Participation in education and learning activities by literacy proficiency level, educational attainment level, educational attainment level of parents and labour market status (2012)**

Survey of Adult Skills, average



Source: OECD (2014), *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, Indicator C6 (www.oecd.org/edu/eag.htm).

Strong literacy skills are associated with high participation.

On average across participating countries, about three out of four adults with a high level of proficiency in literacy (Level 4 or 5 on a 5-level scale) participate in education and learning activities. In contrast, fewer than one-third of individuals at the lowest literacy level (Level 1 or below) participate in continuous learning.

This relationship holds in all participating countries but to different degrees. For example, in Australia, Germany and Korea the gap in participation between the groups with the highest and the lowest literacy proficiency levels is over 50 percentage points. However, in Norway the gap is 32 percentage points, showing that even among adults with low levels of literacy, participation rates can be high. In fact, the participation rate among Norwegian adults who scored at Level 1 or below (46%) is higher than the participation rate among individuals who scored at Level 3 in Italy (40%), Japan (43%), Poland (45%), the Russian Federation (21%) and the Slovak Republic (40%).

Parents' educational attainment doesn't impact participation as much as one's own education level.

Educational attainment is also positively associated with participation in adult education. About 70% of adults with a tertiary qualification participate in education and learning activities whereas the rate falls to 27% among adults who did not complete upper secondary education. In the Czech Republic, Poland, the Slovak Republic and the United States, participation in learning of adults with a tertiary education is over 50 percentage points higher than among adults without upper secondary education.



The educational attainment level of one's parents also has an impact on participation but it is smaller. The gap in participation between individuals whose parents attained below upper secondary education and those whose parents reached the tertiary level is 28 percentage points, compared with a gap of 44 percentage points when looking at the educational attainment of the individuals themselves. For example, individuals whose parents did not reach upper secondary education have a participation rate of 40%, whereas among individuals who have not reached this level themselves, it is only 27%.

28.32
33.7
36.5
100%

Inactive adults do not take advantage of education and learning opportunities.

Across participating national and sub-national entities, employed adults participated more in education and learning (59%) than unemployed adults (44%) and adults outside of the labour market (22%). This situation reflects greater exposure to training and learning opportunities in the workplace but it also suggests that countries could seek ways to provide additional education to the unemployed and inactive populations to align their skills to the needs of the labour market.

Countries with high levels of participation in general also show high levels of participation for adults at each labour market status (namely employment, unemployment and inactivity); this is the case for Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. But there are also countries with below average levels of participation overall where employed and unemployed adults show similar levels of participation: in Austria, Flanders (Belgium) and Korea, the overall participation rate is below 51% and the difference between employed and unemployed adults is only about 5 percentage points. Despite its below average participation rate, Korea also has a relatively high participation rate among the inactive population. Along with Denmark, Finland and Sweden, its participation rate for inactive adults is over 30%.

The bottom line: Learning begets learning: those who already have a high proficiency level in key skills such as literacy and numeracy, and high educational attainment, are those who are most likely to participate in adult education activities. These factors tend to create a virtuous circle for adults with high skills and educational attainment and a vicious circle of low educational attainment, low skills and a lack of access to education to redress skills deficiencies. However, countries like Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden have been able to break the vicious circle and provide adult education and learning across all levels of skills.

National and sub-national entities that participated in the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) and are included in this analysis are Australia, Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland) and the United States.

Note for the Russian Federation
Readers should note that the sample for the Russian Federation does not include the population of the Moscow municipal area. The data published, therefore, do not represent the entire resident population aged 16-65 in Russia but rather the population of Russia excluding the population residing in the Moscow municipal area. More detailed information regarding the data from the Russian Federation as well as that of other countries can be found in the Technical Report of the Survey of Adult Skills.

For more information

OECD (2014), *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en>.

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