cedefop
European Centre
for the Development
of Vocational Training

BRIEFING NOTE

ADULT LEARNING AND CONTINUING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING VALUED BY EUROPEANS

Insights from a pan-European opinion survey conducted by Cedefop

To manage its 'twin transitions' to an economy and society that is green and digital, Europe needs high-quality human capital; not a small elite, but a well-trained general workforce, whose skills at all levels are constantly updated, upgraded and used.

Well-functioning and coordinated continuing vocational education and training (CVET) systems accessible to all Europeans are essential to developing such a workforce ([1]) and to empowering people to manage ever more complex and unpredictable working lives. If people can shape their futures, they can transform economies and societies.

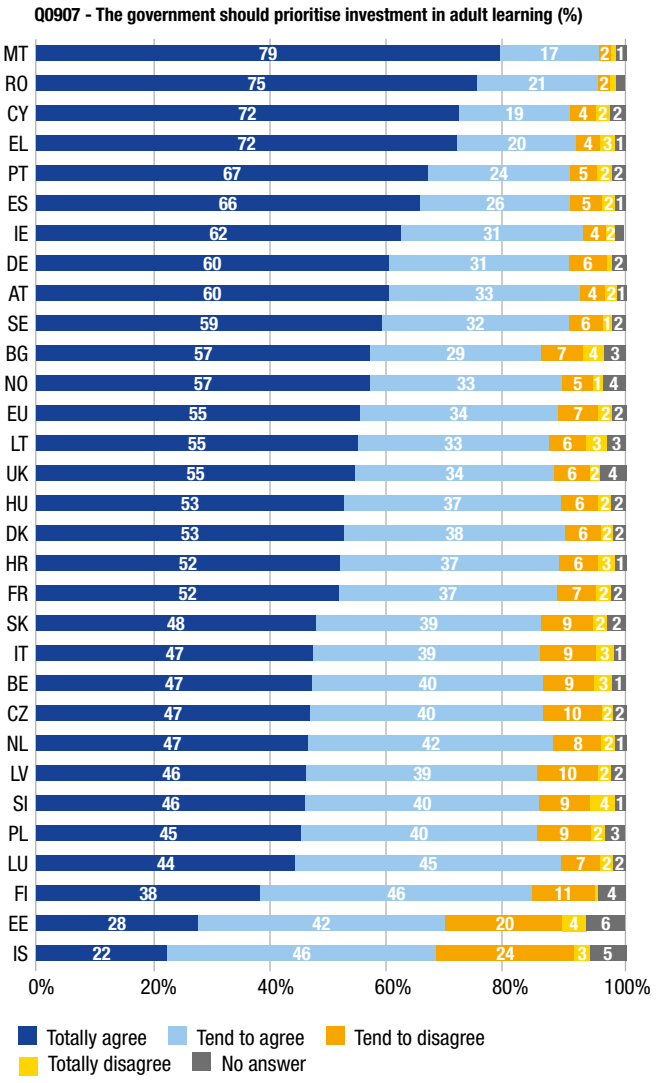
Cedefop's first opinion survey ([2]) examined Europeans' views about initial VET compared to general education. This second survey explores what adults living in the European Union (EU), Iceland and Norway think about adult learning and CVET, given that image and perceptions influence action (Box 1).

PERCEPTIONS: IMPORTANCE

According to survey respondents, the potential need for continuing training is high today and will increase in the future: across all 30 countries surveyed, 96% of respondents agree on the importance of adult learning and CVET. Some 70% of adults believe that such learning will be even more important in 10 years' time, and at least two-thirds in every country surveyed agree that their government should prioritise investment in learning for adults (Figure 1).

Across all countries, 88% of respondents in work at the time of the survey say that their job requires them to keep their skills up to date. This rises to at least 90% in countries such as Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Sweden. Overall, more than a quarter of adults say that they lack either technical or general skills to carry out their job at the required level, hence need training.

FIGURE 1. **GOVERNMENTS SHOULD PRIORITISE INVESTMENT IN ADULT LEARNING AND CVET**



Source: Cedefop opinion survey on adult learning and CVET.

([1]) See Cedefop's work on adult education and CVET.
([2]) Cedefop (2017). *Cedefop European public opinion survey on vocational education and training*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 62

BOX 1. **ABOUT THE SURVEY**

Cedefop's second opinion survey, carried out between May and July 2019, comprised 40 466 telephone interviews of people aged 25 and over living in the EU, Iceland and Norway.

The survey defines adult learning and CVET as any learning activities undertaken by adults (employed or not) with the intention of improving their knowledge or skills. The questionnaire asked about the value of adult learning and CVET in producing desired outcomes and benefits for individuals (such as personal, skill and career development and personal financial situation), society and the economy (such as lower unemployment) and for countries (such as social cohesion).

Building on the answers, survey findings construct the image people have of adult learning and CVET. The findings are in two volumes. The first, *Perceptions on adult learning and continuing vocational education and training in Europe* (*), looks at individual countries and can be downloaded from Cedefop's website in full or in single chapters. The second volume looks at different demographic and socioeconomic groups across all participating countries and will be published in 2021.

(*) https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3086

PERCEPTIONS: BENEFITS

People believe that adult learning and CVET bring them benefits. Respondents who took part in a learning activity in the year prior to the survey were asked why.

In every country more than half of adults totally agree that adult learning and CVET support their personal development. They are also positive about their labour market benefits. Overall, 55% of adults totally agree that adult learning and CVET are necessary for career progression and when looking for a job. Some 49% of adults also totally agree that they can be a route to a better income.

More widely, in 23 of the 30 countries surveyed, at least half of respondents totally agree that adult learning and CVET help reduce unemployment. Respondents are most likely to disagree where unemployment is relatively high, such as Italy and Greece.

The comprehensive strategy and ambitious targets set out in the updated 2020 skills agenda ([3]) on adult participation in learning seems, therefore, to be in line with Europeans' expectations.

In a sign that systems are becoming more flexible, 78% of respondents agree that there are many ways for adults to obtain a State-recognised degree. Though only 46% totally agree that adult learning and CVET are as important as education received at school or university, 32% totally agree that adult learning and CVET are ways to obtain the equivalent of a college or university degree. Similarly, 32% of respondents totally agree that organised work-related training activities can lead to qualifications recognised by the State.

Most (69%) think that the quality of adult learning and CVET in their country is 'good' (11% say very good and 58% 'fairly good', while 24% of respondents think the quality is fairly bad (19%) or very bad (5%). In all countries, except Italy, respondents describe adult learning and CVET provision as good rather than bad. Among respondents who took part in organised training activities in the year prior to the survey – the actual beneficiaries of adult learning and CVET – 93% say it was good (39% 'very good' and 54% 'fairly good').

PERCEPTIONS: ACCESS

The positive image of adult learning and CVET includes perceptions of availability, access and information. Some 72% of adults agree that their country offers many adult learning and CVET opportunities (Figure 2).

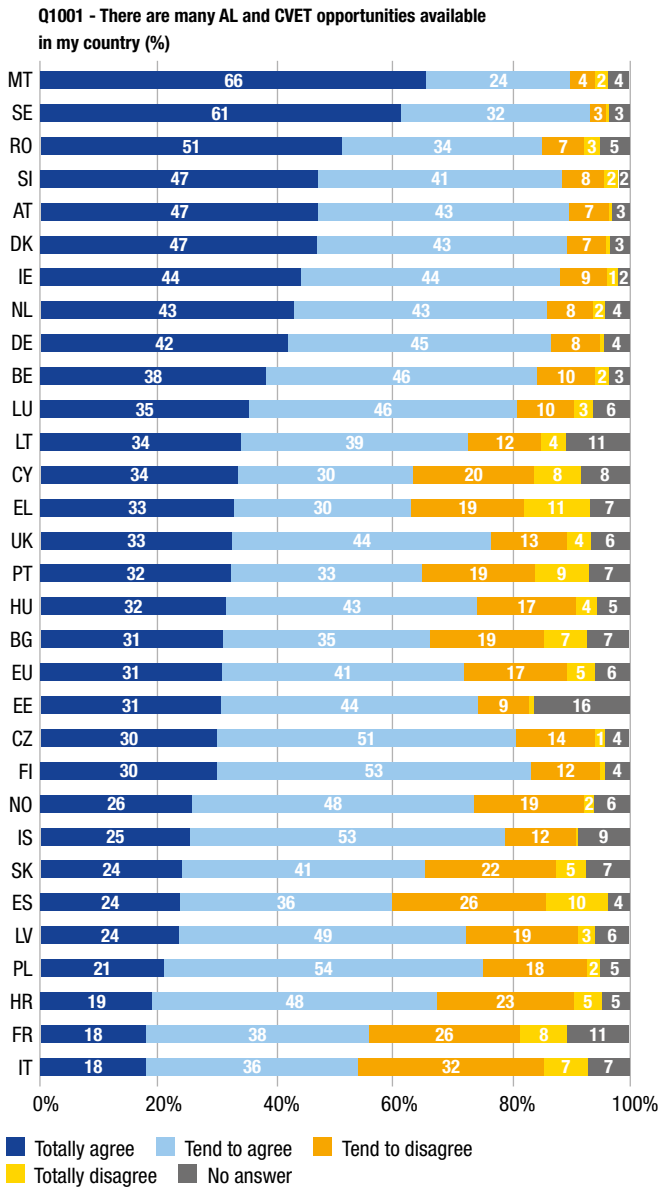
Around two-thirds also agree that information on adult learning and CVET is easy to find in their country, with France and Spain having most disagreement. Some 55% of respondents looked for information on adult learning and CVET in the year prior to the survey; 19% have looked often, 21% sometimes and 15% rarely.

In all countries except Romania, adults said that the best advice by far on adult learning and CVET can be found on the internet (63%). Other important sources are local colleges or universities, professional or sector associations, and friends or colleagues. Employment agencies or other public services, family and social partner organisations are considered less important. Respondents across Europe seem to use the internet as an information filter and then take further advice locally.

In most countries, family is considered the best source of support for participating in adult learning and CVET. Exceptions are the Netherlands, Norway and the UK (where an employer is regarded as most likely to offer support), France (where it is professional or sector associations), and Luxembourg (where government is the most frequent response).

([3]) https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=9723

FIGURE 2. **ADULT LEARNING AND CVET OPPORTUNITIES**



Source: Cedefop opinion survey on adult learning and CVET.

In 22 countries, the most frequent reason given for not taking part in organised training is that people feel they do not need it. In Cyprus, 'no need for training' ties with 'difficulties due to other commitments'. Other commitments is the main reason in five countries, including Ireland and Greece. In Romania and France, the most common reason is 'feeling too old'.

Respondents are positive about measures to encourage adults to participate in work-related learning and training. These measures include flexible working hours, financial support, certification of learning, support with childcare and caring responsibilities, more information and guidance, adapting learning to individual needs and better-quality training.

However, opinions differ between northern and southern Europe over expanding these measures. Countries such as Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Malta, Portugal and Romania are most likely to agree totally that more of such measures will increase participation in adult learning and CVET. Belgium, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria and Finland are more sceptical. This suggests that some countries see scope for stepping up such measures to raise participation, while others seemingly do not.

A POSITIVE IMAGE OVERALL, BUT…

Adults in the EU, Iceland and Norway have a positive image of adult learning and CVET. That view is deeply held, widely shared and reinforced by family and friends. Adult learning and CVET may not have the same status as tertiary education, but they are highly valued, associated with real practical benefits, increasingly seen as a necessity and as a priority for government investment. In all the countries surveyed, information about, and opportunities to participate in, adult learning and CVET are considered good.

It is important to note that, in the survey, the main difference between 'positive' and 'less positive' in all countries is because fewer people totally agree rather than simply agree; although seemingly slight, these differences matter as they point to areas of possible improvement.

While people support measures to encourage participation in adult learning and CVET, there is no measure to address the main reason people give for not participating in them, that of 'no need'. This is despite nearly nine out of 10 survey respondents in work saying that their job requires them to keep their skills constantly up to date, and around a quarter saying that they lack some technical or general skills to carry out their job at the required level.

Raising participation in adult learning and CVET has been on the European agenda for more than 20 years, but various measures show that, in many Member States, levels of participation are not in the desired range. The survey's finding that the main reason for non-participation – 'no need' – is consistent with those of other surveys, including the two regular Eurostat surveys in the field ([4]).

However, the Cedefop survey makes very clear that people seeing 'no need' for adult learning and CVET is not because they are negative about them. Any lack of perceived 'attractiveness' of CVET as a learning option or of participation in it is not due to a negative image of adult learning and CVET. On the

([4]) The Adult education survey, which has been carried out by Eurostat three times since 2007, and the Continuing vocational training survey, which started in 1993 and has been carried out five times since.

contrary, non-participation in adult learning and CVET is less about lack of esteem for them and more about a lack of incentive. People see the need for adult learning and CVET in abstract terms but seem to be unable to find the motivation, incentives and learning opportunities suiting their personal needs.

Those who participate in adult learning and CVET for personal development have an incentive in that they define the benefits and control the outcomes. In the labour market or at work, however, employers, rather than individuals, are most likely to decide who benefits from participating in adult learning and CVET. The lack of any immediate personal benefit may put people off participating. Government measures can encourage participation of adults who already want to learn. But they cannot provide the key incentive for participation, such as a pay rise or promotion.

Attractiveness of adult learning and CVET is not only about people's incentives to participate, but also employers' willingness to invest. Employer-sponsored training has increased in recent years. However, the survey's positive image of availability of adult learning and CVET sits uncomfortably with employers saying they have difficulties finding the skills they need. More opportunities for work-based learning for adults may help increase participation and address skill mismatch.

The Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised the overall importance of VET to Europe's recovery and transformation. Even before the crisis, over 45% of the adult population in the EU had low or outdated skills and potentially needed upskilling or reskilling. In response, the European skills agenda, a five-year plan to improve skills and their use, aims to increase participation in adult learning and CVET to 32% by 2025 ([5]).

The positive image of CVET emerging from the survey gives policy-makers a strong basis for strengthening adult learning and CVET and establishing them as a standard path accessible to all adults. Nevertheless, building effective CVET systems poses some significant challenges.

First, it requires complex institutional and governance arrangements. Second, it implies a shift in teaching and learning paradigms and modes going beyond standard training provision. To tap the full potential of adult learning and CVET, it is useful to expand work-based learning arrangements. Also, online learning and other alternative modes, including non-degree or non-credit learning, help make CVET more attractive and more responsive to the very diverse needs of adult learners. Finally, building more effective CVET and adult learning systems also entails ensuring synergies between the different areas of policy supporting them, including financial and non-financial incentives, guidance, validation, outreach policies and the continuous professional development of VET trainers and mentors.

Cedefop's second opinion survey data informs the continuing debate about these proposals and, more generally, the future of adult learning and CVET in Europe.

([5]) See https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en

cedefop | European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

Briefing note – 9152 EN
Cat. No: TI-BB-20-006-EN-N
ISBN 978-92-896-3030-6, doi:10.2801/72311
Copyright © European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), 2020.
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International
Briefing notes are published in English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish, and the EU Presidency country's language. To receive them regularly register at:
www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/user/register

Other briefing notes and Cedefop publications are at:
www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications.aspx

Europe 123, Thessaloniki (Pylea), GREECE
Postal address: Cedefop service post, 57001, Thermi, GREECE
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020
Email: info@cedefop.europa.eu

www.cedefop.europa.eu