



**Pascaline
Descy**
Cedefop



Having a low level of education in Europe: an at-risk situation

The European labour market is witnessing changes in the supply of skills and the demand for skills. The direction taken by these changes is far from advantageous for people with low levels of education. This group accounts for around one third of the population aged 25 to 59 years in the European Union (i.e., 59 582 000 individuals, equivalent to the population of France), which makes the situation particularly worrying. Using a set of statistical indicators drawn from recent surveys and analyses, this article is intended to shed light on the situation in the labour market of individuals with a level of education below upper secondary, especially during their initial quest for employment, and to describe their situation in the context of lifelong learning. Some proposals for lines of action are put forward in conclusion.

(¹) In this article, the term 'level of education' refers to the levels defined in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED, 1976). Three levels of education are used here: ISCED 0-2, which corresponds to a level of education at best equivalent to lower secondary education, ISCED 3, which corresponds to a level equivalent to upper secondary education, and ISCED 5-7, which corresponds to a level equivalent to tertiary education.

It should be noted that the categories ISCED 0-2 and ISCED 5-7 are very broad. ISCED 0-2 covers levels of education ranging from early childhood education (ISCED 0) to lower secondary education (ISCED 2), while ISCED 5-7 ranges from non-university tertiary education (ISCED 5) to post-graduate university programmes (ISCED 7).

This article sets out to describe the situation of people with low levels of education¹ in Europe, on the basis of a number of indicators calculated using data from the Labour Force Survey (Cedefop, European Commission, Eurostat, 2001; Eurostat, Newcronos Database, 2001). This description will be set against the background of indicators based on level of literacy skills (taken from the International Adult Literacy Survey: OCDE and Statistics Canada, 2000). Following a discussion of the rise in the level of education and skills in Europe, these two sources will be used to illustrate, sequentially, transition from the education system to the world of work, employment, unemployment and access to training as functions of level of education and literacy skills. The purpose is to demonstrate the phenomenon of selective exclusion among groups with low levels of education and skills.

Skills required in knowledge-based societies

It is no longer news that the level of education of the population is rising. Within one generation, the proportion of individuals not completing secondary education has fallen from approximately 50% to less than a third in the European Union (Fig. 1, Table 1). Among individuals aged 30 to 34 years, one person in two now has a certificate of upper secondary education, and one in four a tertiary education qualification. This change is to be welcomed. A clear consensus has in fact grown up in Europe that upper secondary education has become the minimum for a satisfactory start to working life,

given the increasing demands of knowledge-based societies.

**Table 1:
Population aged 25 to 59
years by level of education
in the European Union,
in thousands, 2000**

ISCED 0-2	ISCED 3	ISCED 5-7
59 852	75 546	38 372

Source: LFS, Eurostat, Newcronos, 2000.

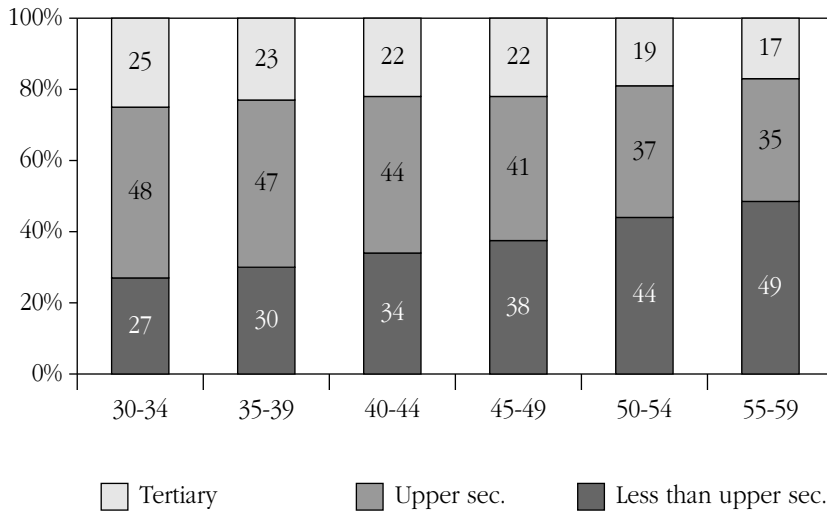
This general opinion is confirmed by the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS, OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000). On the basis of tests, this survey defines a minimum threshold of reading (literacy level 3) which is required to meet the demands of everyday life and work in developed societies. From Figure 2 it is evident that individuals who have not completed upper secondary education do not, on average, reach this minimum threshold of skills (or only just do so, in Germany and Sweden). On the other hand, in all the countries in the European Union which took part in the IALS survey, people with upper secondary qualifications attain, on average, literacy level 3 and thus have the minimum skills needed to cope with the demands of those societies.

These results are confirmed by an examination of the percentage of the population who, while having failed to complete upper secondary education, attain at least level 3 in document literacy (Figure 3). Although the situation differs greatly be-



Figure 1:

Population by level of education and by age, EU-15, 2000, %



Source: ECFT, 2000.

Box 1:

International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

In the International Adult Literacy Survey, three domains of literacy are defined: prose texts (e.g., newspaper articles, stories, brochures and instruction manuals), document texts (e.g., job applications, payroll forms, public transport timetables), and quantitative texts (e.g., cheque books, bills, order forms, determining the amount of interest on a loan or an investment). For each of these domains, five levels of literacy are specified:

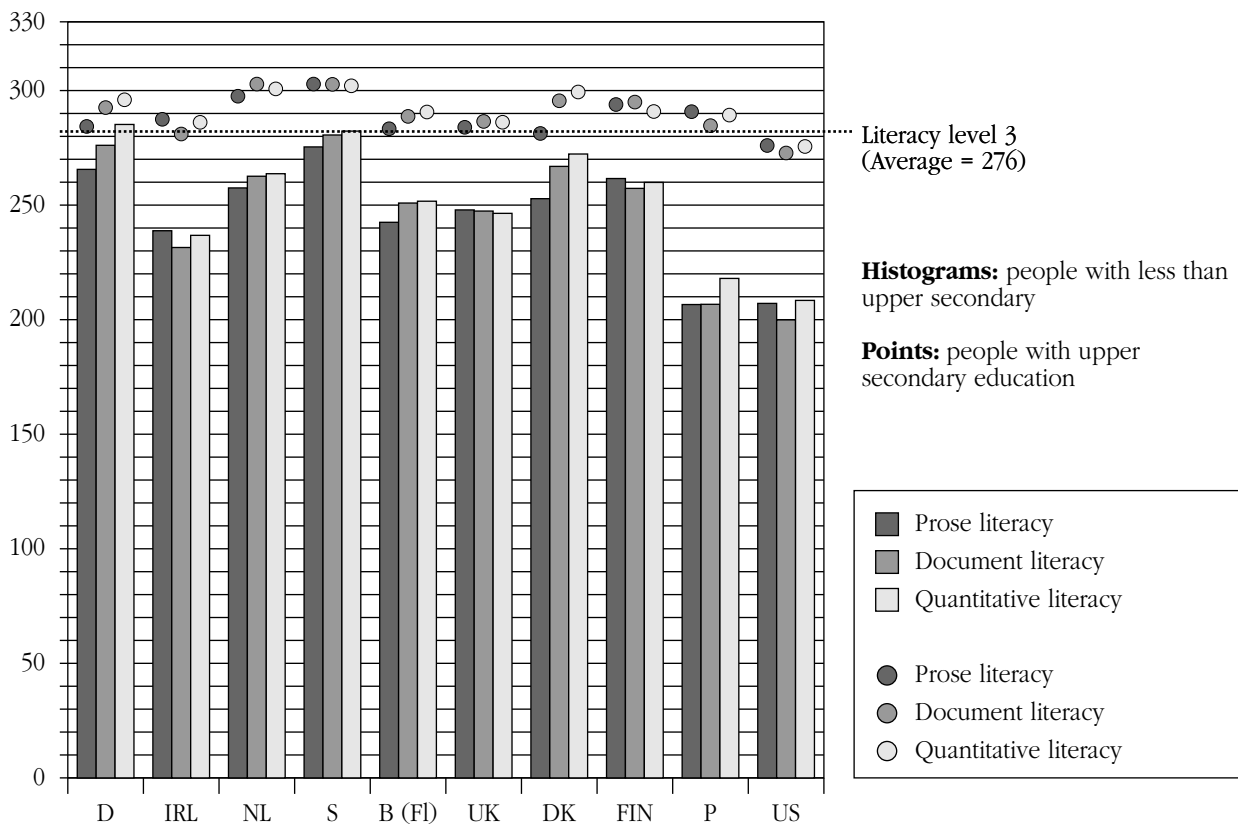
- Level 1: a low level of skill (e.g., being unable to determine the dosage of a medicine to be given to a child from the instructions on the packaging);
- Level 2: a level of skill which makes it possible to handle simple, clearly worded material, where the tasks involved are not too complex. The level of skill is low but is nonetheless higher than at Level 1. The people concerned can read, but their level of skill makes it difficult for them to cope with unfamiliar demands;
- Level 3: the minimum necessary to cope with the demands of everyday life and working situations in developed societies. It calls for the ability to handle several sources of information and to solve complex problems. This level corresponds more or less to the level of skill required to complete secondary education successfully and to enter tertiary education;
- Levels 4 and 5: high levels of skill at handling information.

Source: OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000.



Figure 2:

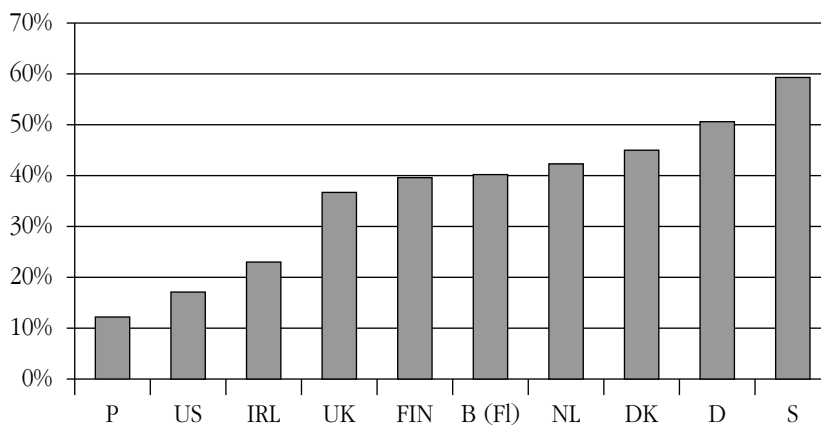
Mean literacy scores by level of education, 16-65 years, 1994-1998



Source: IALS, 1994-1998, OECD, Statistics Canada, 2000.

Figure 3:

Population not having completed upper secondary education achieving scores at levels 3 and 4/5 in document literacy 16-65 years, %



Source: IALS, 1994-1998, OECD, Statistics Canada, 2000.

tween countries, in most cases over half of the individuals concerned can read but experience difficulties using this skill in complex and/or unfamiliar situations (according to the definition of IALS levels 3 and 4/5, see Box 1).

This article will now consider how these differences in level of education and skills are reflected in access to employment, vulnerability to unemployment and participation in lifelong learning.

Entry into employment for young people with low skill levels

Despite the general rise in the level of education, there are still a substantial number of young people not completing upper secondary education. In 2000, one in five young people aged 18 to 24 years in the European Union (18%) had at most a lower secondary level of education (ISCED 0-2). However, the European average hides significant differences be-



tween Member States, since this percentage ranges from 8% in Sweden to 43% in Portugal.²

According to the TIMSS³ study, which evaluated young people's skills in mathematics and sciences, if young people leave the education system before completing upper secondary education, they are unlikely to have a level of numeracy sufficient to ensure their employability and to allow them to update their skills during their working lives (McIntosh and Steedman, 1999).

As regards level of literacy (Table 1), although the general rise in the level of education seems to have had the effect of increasing the overall level of skills among young people (16-25 years) in comparison with the preceding generation (46-55 years), a substantial percentage of them do not reach literacy level 3⁴ in the countries studied (between one in five young people in Sweden and the Netherlands, and one in two in Ireland). They are thus theoretically not prepared to meet the demands of life in developed societies.

How do young people with low levels of education (ISCED 0-2) fare during the transition to employment? If one looks at the unemployment situation of young people with less than 5 years' experience in the labour market (juniors), it quickly becomes apparent (Figure 4) that the tran-

sition from the education system to active life is more difficult for young people with ISCED levels 0-2, even in countries where it generally seems easier to find a job (those where juniors are on average not at a great disadvantage in comparison with adults with more than 15 years' experience in the labour market: Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria and Germany). In almost all countries in the European Union (the exceptions being Greece, Italy and Portugal), young people with a low level of education face unemployment rates appreciably higher on entry to working life than those who have continued in education and obtained qualifications at higher levels.

It is also worth mentioning that these young people continue to face difficulties in the labour market even though the size of the cohort is declining and competition should thus be becoming less fierce.

Figures for transition to unemployment and employment (in relation to the employment situation in the previous year) also illustrate the greater difficulties faced by young people who have not completed upper secondary education. When they are new entrants to the labour market (i.e. with less than 5 years' experience), young people with ISCED levels 0-2 are not only more susceptible to unemployment but also less likely to escape from it quickly (within a year) (Figure 5).

However, rather than the level of education as such, it is individuals' implicit levels of skills that matter in employment terms. Despite low levels of education, young people with a high literacy score are unlikely to be unemployed (Figure 6). Nonetheless, there is an undeniable correlation between level of education and level of literacy, and the probability of having an adequate level of reading skill without completing secondary education is relatively low (see Figure 3 above).

Once in the labour market...

The size of the group at risk of exclusion in the labour market fluctuates in accordance with the socio-economic situation.

Table 2:

Percentage of population attaining literacy level 3 or above

	Literacy level 3 or above	
	16-25 yrs.	46-55 yrs
S	80 %	73 %
NL	77 %	52 %
B (FI)	76 %	52 %
CH	67 %	45 %
D	66 %	58 %
UK	56 %	47 %
IRL	50 %	34 %
US	45 %	51 %

Source: OECD, Statistics Canada, 1997.

(²) Labour Force Survey, Eurostat, 2000.

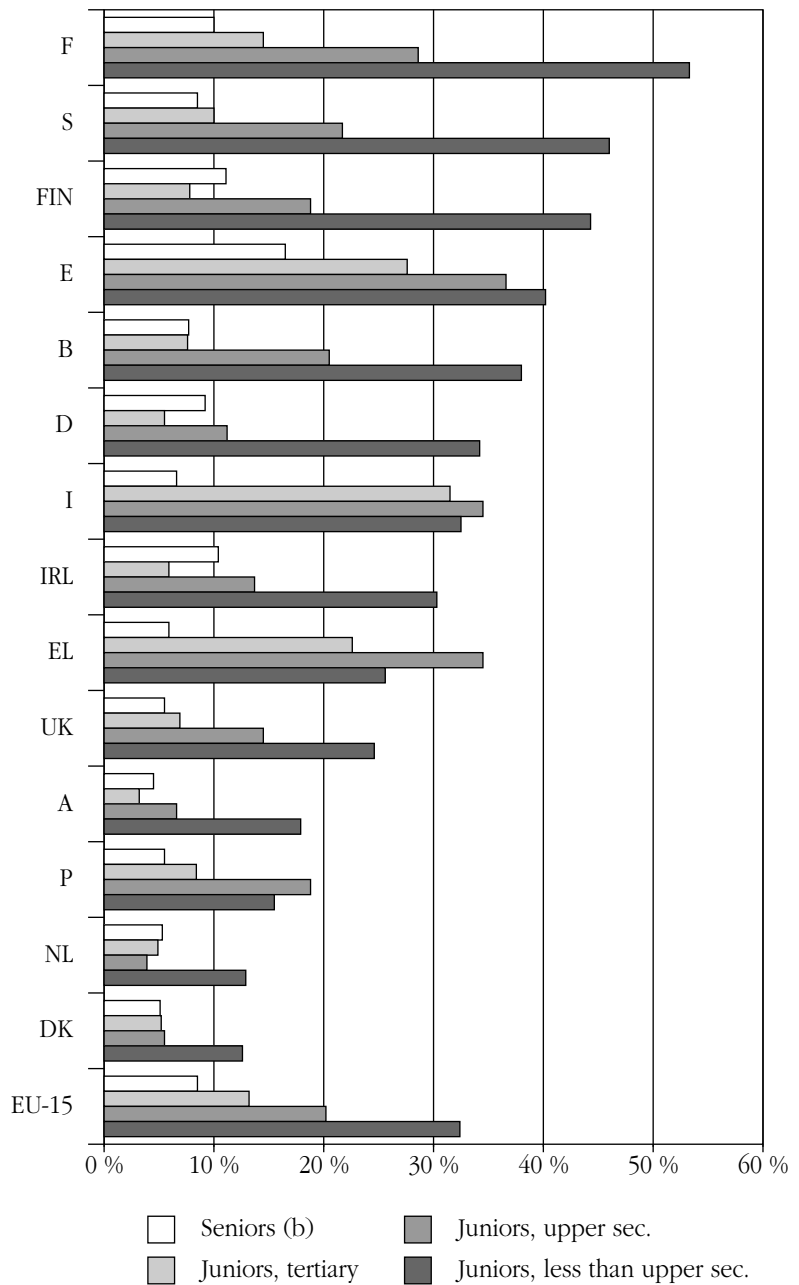
(³) Third International Mathematics and Science Study.

(⁴) See Box 1.



Figure 4:

Unemployment rates of juniors (a) by level of education, EU-15, 1997, %



(a) young people with between 0 and 5 years of experience on the labour market.

(b) more than 15 years of experience on the labour market.

Source: Key Data: the transition between education and working life, 2001

In developed societies, unfavourable economic conditions, shortage of jobs and rising demands in terms of skills mean that individuals without higher levels of education are subject to greater economic uncertainty. While they used not to be particularly stigmatised, people who have not completed upper secondary educa-

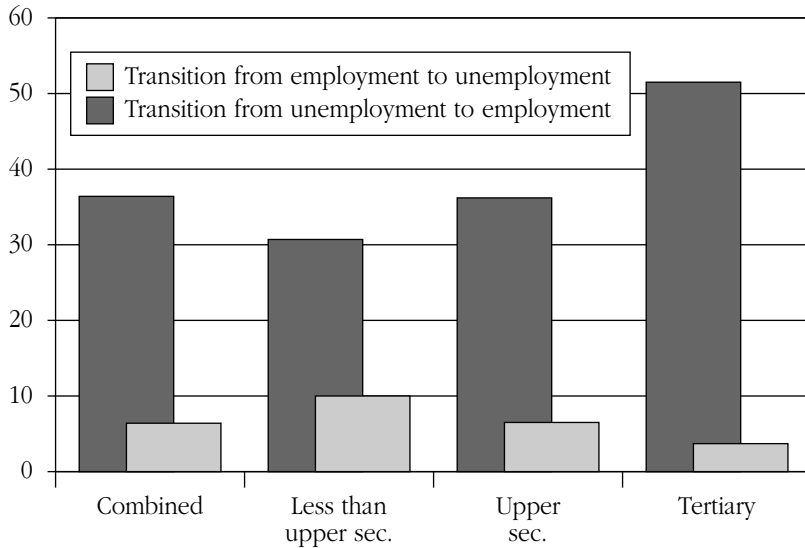
tion are now increasingly regarded as an 'at-risk group'.

In the course of their working lives, individuals with ISCED levels 0-2 can expect to spend more time in unemployment than people with higher levels of education. In the countries shown in Table 3,



Figure 5:

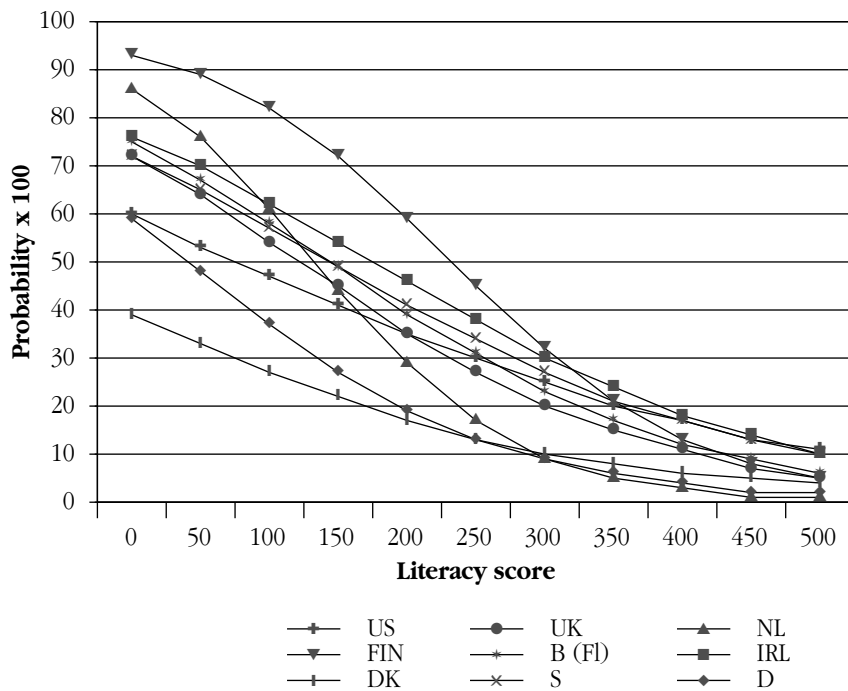
Transitions on the labour market ^(a) by level of education, juniors ^(b), EU-15, 1997, %



^(a) as a function of the professional situation of the individuals the previous year.
^(b) young people with between 0 and 5 years of experience on the labour market.
 Source: Key Data: the transition between education and working life, 2001

Figure 6:

Probability of being unemployed by literacy score (prose comprehension), men aged 16 to 25 years with a low level of education



Source: IALS, 1994-1998; OCDE, Statistics Canada, 2000.



Table 3:

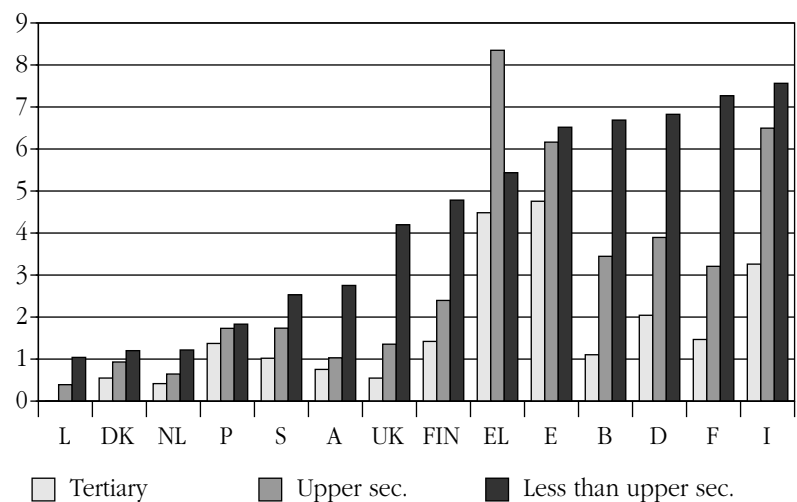
Expected years of unemployment ^(a) during working life by level of education, men aged 25 to 64 years, 1995

	Level of education		
	Less than upper sec.	Upper sec.	Tertiary
L	0,7	0,6	0,1
A	1,6	0,9	0,6
EL	1,8	1,7	1,9
NL	1,9	1,1	1,1
P	1,9	1,6	1,4
I	2,2	1,4	1,8
B	3,0	1,4	0,9
US	3,0	1,7	1,1
DK	4,0	2,8	2,0
S	4,3	3,3	2,0
F	4,4	2,5	2,1
D	4,5	2,3	1,6
IRL	5,0	2,3	1,4
UK	5,4	2,9	1,6
E	5,6	3,9	2,9
FIN	6,8	5,8	3,1

^(a) Expected years of unemployment means the number of years for which an individual will be unemployed over his or her entire working life, at current rates of unemployment (for further information on methodology, see OECD 1998).
Source: OECD, 1998

Figure 7:

Long-term unemployment rates (1 year and more) by level of education, 2000, %

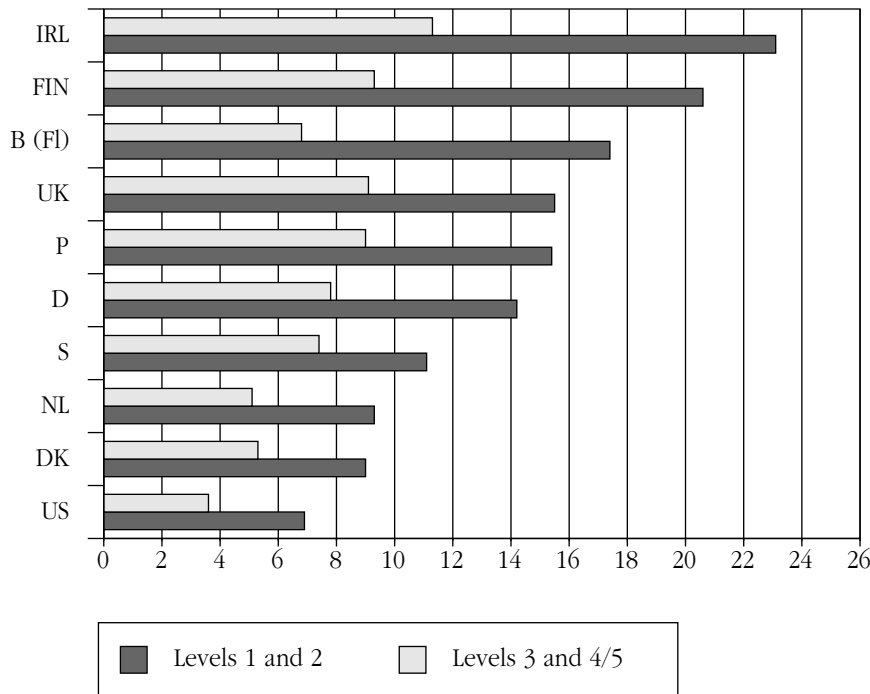


Source: Eurostat, LFS, 2000.



Figure 8:

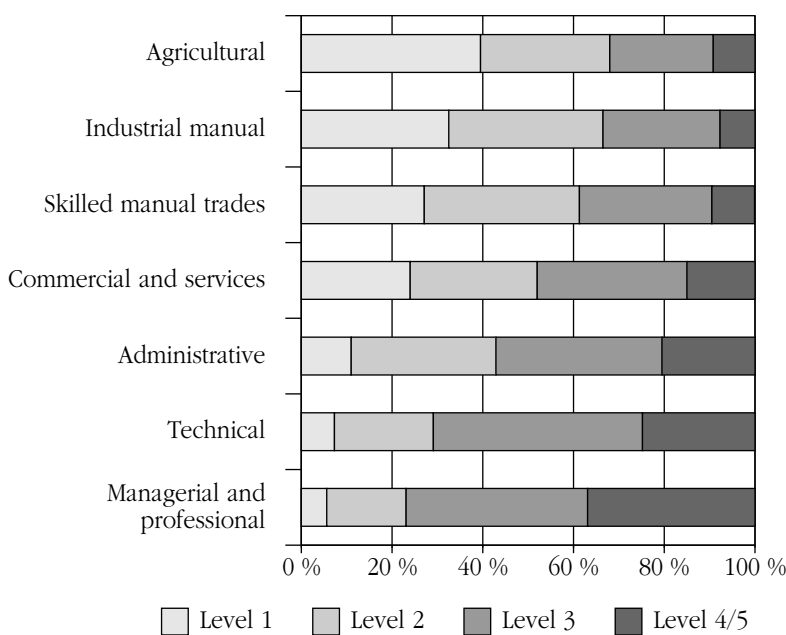
Unemployment rate by level of literacy (prose comprehension), 16-65 years, %



Source: IALS, 1994-1998; OCDE, Statistics Canada 2000.

Figure 9:

Category of occupation by level of literacy (document comprehension), 16-65 years, average IALS countries, %



Source: IALS, 1994-1998; OCDE, Statistics Canada, 2000.



adults in ISCED category 0-2 can expect between 8 months and nearly 7 years of unemployment during their working lives. If these figures are compared with those for individuals with high levels of education (between 1 month and around 3 years), there is seen to be a substantial difference. A person's level of education is thus a predictor of the time which will be spent in unemployment. This is confirmed by the indicator of long-term unemployment (one year or more) by level of education: individuals with ISCED levels 0-2 are more likely to be affected by this phenomenon (Figure 7).

An examination of the relationship between literacy and employment shows equally clearly the disadvantage suffered by people who have low levels of skills (Figure 8): everywhere, their rate of unemployment is appreciably higher. The level of reading skills is also a predictor of occupation. Literacy levels 1 and 2 are markedly less well represented among managerial, professional and technical occupations but account for the majority of manual occupations (Figure 9). There is a wide gap in the labour market between literacy levels 1 and 2, and levels 3 and above.

It would therefore appear from an examination of these indicators that a substantial number of individuals have not completed secondary education. This low level of education correlates with a poor level of ability in reading tasks: most of those who have not completed secondary education have a level of reading skill which does not enable them to cope with work and everyday situations in present-day society. These people first encounter difficulties when they start out in the world of work. And once they have entered the labour market, they form the most vulnerable groups of individuals, and are most likely to suffer unemployment in general and long-term unemployment in particular.

Lifelong learning: a need and a requirement

The situation of those with few qualifications is made all the more worrying by studies showing that they take part in less

training during their working lives, and thus have fewer opportunities to update their skills, than those with better qualifications. This is found both among the population in general, and among those undergoing training as part of their work. It means that the workers least likely to have the skills and knowledge required in the labour market are also those who participate least in training, one of the ways of remedying that situation.

On average, only 2.4% of the population in the European Union with ISCED levels 0-2 had taken part in education or training during the four weeks preceding the Labour Force Survey in the year 2000. This is almost four times fewer than those with upper secondary qualifications (9.4%) and six times fewer than those with tertiary education qualifications (15.5%) (Figure 10).

In all the European countries studied, people with ISCED levels 0-2 have lower rates of participation in work-based training and spend fewer hours in training, with the exception of Germany and, to a lesser degree, Denmark, where the number of hours of training offered to employees with ISCED levels 0-2 is greater (Figure 11).

Level of literacy also correlates positively with participation in lifelong learning: the lower the level of reading skill, the less a person will take part in training (Figure 12).

In all countries, *the situation of individuals with low levels of education thus appears critical*. Not only do they constitute the group least able, given their formal education and average level of literacy skills, to cope with the various demands of present-day society, but they are also the group participating least in training and thus having least chance of updating and renewing their skills.

Conclusions and proposed lines of action

In view of the necessarily very restricted space available for this article, and the limitations of the comparative data available at the European and international

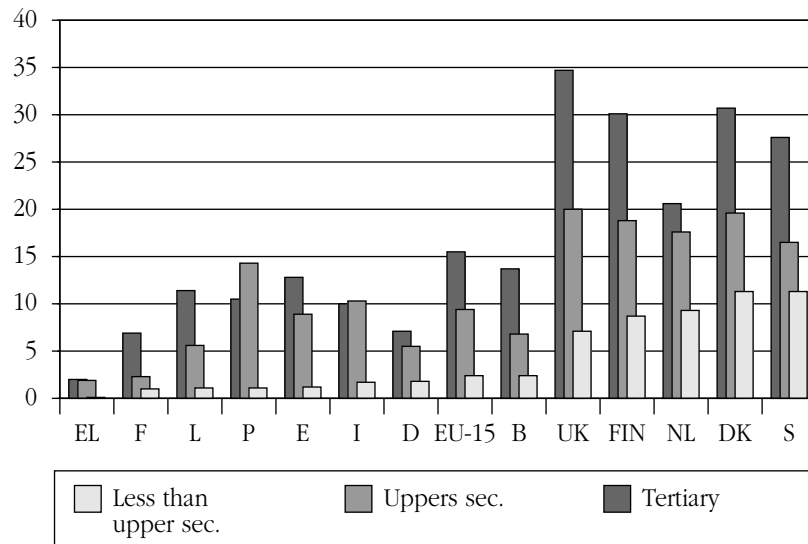


level, it is not possible to describe in detail the causes and consequences of the selective disadvantage suffered by individuals with low levels of education and skills. However, we have shown that their situation in the labour market is precarious since they tend, as a group, to suffer cumulative deficits, *exclusion from both employment and learning reinforcing one another*. Furthermore, the decline in the size of this group has not led to any improvement in their relative situation. This is all the more worrying in that individuals with a low level of education account for more than one third of the population aged 25 to 59 years within the European Union.

This selective exclusion would appear to be the result of a combination of factors linked to the substantial changes which have transformed the demand for skills in the labour market: the widespread introduction of new technologies, changes in working processes and the organisation of work, increased competition, re-

Figure 10:

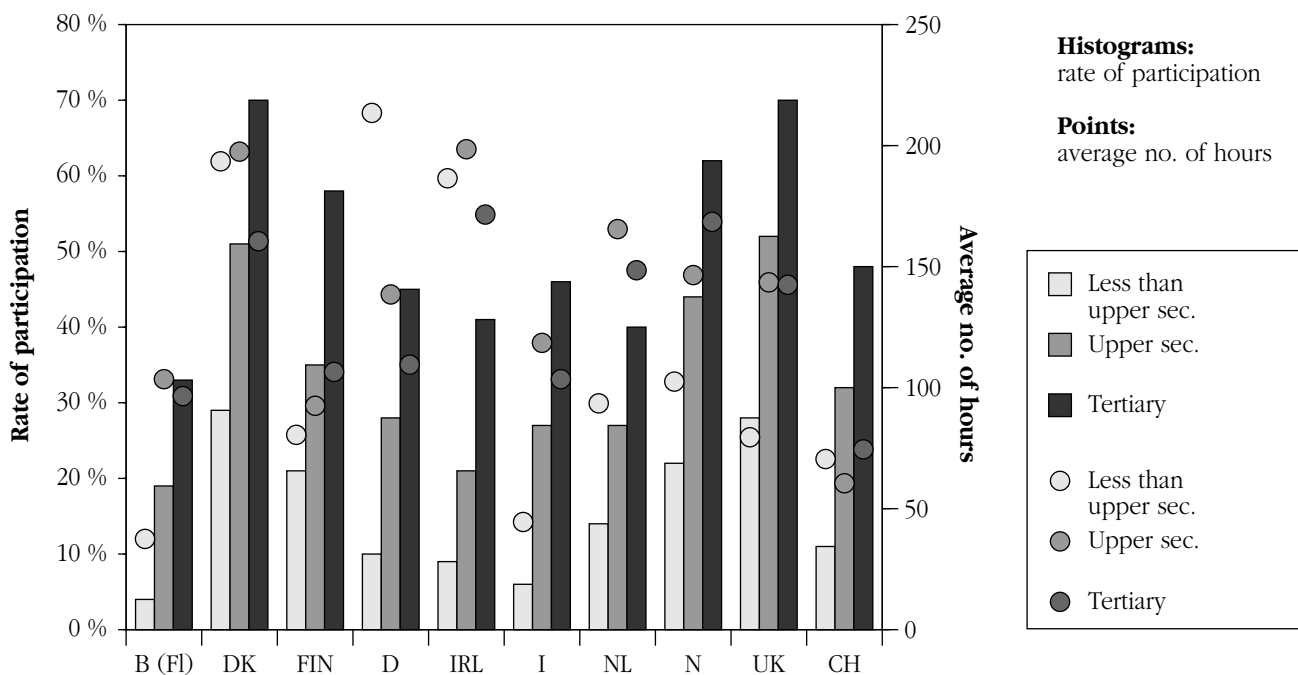
Population aged 25-64 having taken part in education or training during the previous four weeks, EU-15, 2000, %



Source: ECFT, 2000. IRL, A: no data available

Figure 11:

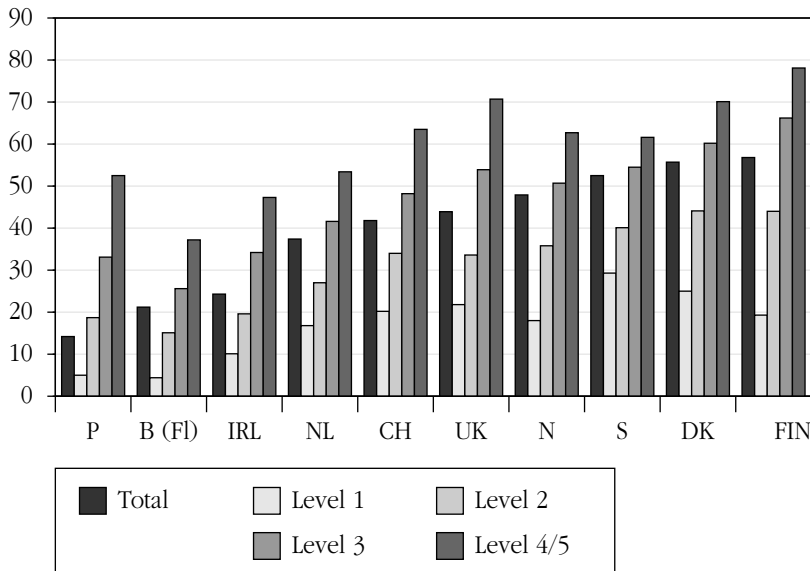
Participation in work-based education and continuing training by level of education, rate of participation and average number of hours in education or training



Source: IALS, 1994-1998, OCDE, Statistics Canada, 2000. B (Fl) IALS 95/96, DK IALS 98/99, FIN 1995, D 1997, IRL IALS 95/96, I IALS 98/99, NL IALS 94/95, N IALS 98/99, UK IALS 95/96, CH IALS 98/99.



Figure 12:
Participation in adult education and training during the year preceding the survey by each level of literacy and in total, document literacy, 15-65 years, %



Source: IALS, 1994-1998; OCDE, Statistics Canada, 2000.

structuring of industries, polarisation of labour markets, etc. Paradoxically, it is also partly the outcome of changes in supply. In a market where qualifications are commonplace, substitution phenomena appear, with the result that low-skilled jobs are taken by people whose qualifications are higher than those required by the job. The general rise in the level of education thus appears to be a factor in the exclusion of the least skilled. Research findings are not clear as to the relative significance of these different factors, but it is certain that changes in both the supply and the demand side have transformed the relationship between these two poles, to the detriment of people with low levels of education. What can be done about this? The following suggestions, which remain at the level of general principles, may be put forward.

□ It is often impossible to isolate education, training and employment from other key aspects of individuals' private and

social lives: habitat, health and voluntary activities. There is a need for targeted policies, specifically tailored to different groups (young people, those in employment, the unemployed, those outside the labour market, and older workers). Life-long learning is one of the key elements of these active policies. The aim must be to maintain and update the skills of the individuals concerned and to encourage them to become integrated into the labour market and, more generally, into society. If this aim is to be achieved, practical steps, policies and legislative provisions need to be coordinated.

□ While training, especially from a life-long learning perspective, aims to integrate all individuals into employment and the cognitive economy, it needs to be preceded by a policy of support (orientation and guidance) so as to prepare individuals to undertake the training that is appropriate for them under the best possible conditions.

□ To the extent that the criteria which define the category of people with low skill levels are based primarily on the results of formal education and do not take into account all the skills acquired from working experience and everyday life, evaluation and validation of non-formal and informal learning may prove useful tools. Hence, it is obvious that this disadvantaged group will benefit, both in the labour market and in terms of lifelong learning, if all their skills are validated and recognised, regardless of the manner in which they were acquired. If an individual's skills can be identified, this not only may make it possible to guide his or her learning and to build on skills previously acquired, but will also make it easier to give recognition to those skills and to make them count in the labour market.

Improving and maintaining the abilities of people with low levels of education and labour market skills is an absolute necessity if the marginalisation and exclusion of a significant proportion of the population and the labour force is to be avoided.



Bibliography

- Cedefop, European Commission, Eurostat**, 2001. *The transition between education and working life: key data on vocational training in the European Union*. EUR-OP.
- European Commission, Eurostat, Cedefop**, 1999. *Young people's training: key data on vocational training in the European Union*. Luxembourg: EUR-OP.
- European Commission, Eurostat**, 2001. *The social situation in the European Union 2001*. Luxembourg: EUR-OP.
- Descy P., Tessaring M.**, 2001. *Training and learning for competence: second report on vocational training in Europe: synthesis report 2000*. Cedefop Reference series. Luxembourg: EUR-OP.
- McIntosh S., Steedman H.**, 1999. *Low skills: a problem for Europe*. News skills programme of research. Final report to DG XII. European Commission [online]. Available on the Internet: http://improving-ser.sti.jrc.it/default/page.gx?_app.page=entity.html&_app.action=entity&_entity.object=TSER——00000000000005C5&_entity.name=Report
- OECD**, 1998. *Investment in Human Capita: An International Comparison*. Paris: OECD (CERI).
- OECD**, 2001. *Education at a Glance. OECD indicators*. Paris: OECD.
- OECD**, 2001. *Education Policy Analysis*. Paris: OCDE.
- OECD**, Statistics Canada, 1997. *Literacy skills for the knowledge society: further results from the international adult literacy survey*. Paris: OECD.
- OECD**, Statistics Canada, 2000. *Literacy in the information age. Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey*. Paris: OECD.