



Chapter 5. PERCEPTIONS: IMAGE

Perceptions on adult learning and continuing vocational education and training in Europe

Volume 1: Second opinion survey

MEMBER STATES

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CHAPTER 5.

Perceptions: image

Chapter 5 outlines observations on the perceived importance and benefits of adult learning and continuing vocational education and training (CVET) as well as access to them. It also discusses some key findings about their image from the survey data.

5.1. Importance

In all Member States respondents strongly believe that learning throughout life is important for their personal development and work. In each country, at least 70% of respondents say that adult learning and CVET will be more important to career progression in 10 years' time, ranging from 93% in Malta to 72% in Slovakia.

In each country, at least two-thirds of respondents agree their government should prioritise investment in learning for adults in their country, ranging from 98% in Malta, 96% in Romania, 92% in Greece and 91% in Cyprus to 74% in Finland, 70% in Estonia and 68% in Iceland.

Across all Member States, respondents who participated in learning in the past year were asked why. When given the option of multiple answers, the two most common reasons respondents gave for participating in adult learning and CVET were personal development and to improve job skills. Respondents gave these reasons for all types of learning: organised; done on one's own; and work related or not. Other important reasons for participation were to improve basic and computer skills.

Underlining the importance of job skills, the survey found that 88% (including 63% who totally agree) of all respondents who were in work at the time of the survey agree that their job requires them to keep their skills constantly up to date. This ranges from 94% in Sweden and Norway, to 84% in Latvia and Romania and 81% in Slovakia. Further, respondents from all Member States say that they lack technical and general skills.

Some 28% of all respondents in work say that they lack some technical skills and 22% some general skills to carry out their job at the required level.

Respondents are most content with their level of technical skills in Italy (92%) and Iceland (88%) and with their general skills in Finland and Iceland (both 91%), and Italy (88%). Portugal is the only country where most respondents say that they lack some technical (51%) and general skills (52%) for their job, but significant minorities say the same in Cyprus (46% technical; 40% general) and Luxembourg (45% technical; 41% general).

5.2. Benefits

Member States' provision of adult learning and CVET has a positive image. It is seen as having various employment-related benefits and as important for personal development and further educational attainment.

5.2.1. Employment related benefits

There is strong and widespread agreement in all Member States that adult education and CVET are important to: career progression (91% of respondents); finding a new job (also 91%); obtaining a better income (86%); and reducing unemployment (84%). Some 84% of all respondents also agree that organised work-related training is important to develop skills for any job.

Malta, Romania and Greece (except on the question of reducing unemployment) are the most positive about these employment-related benefits. Respondents in Italy are among the least positive; 18% of respondents in Italy do not agree that adult learning and CVET are important to career progression.

Further, 21% of respondents in Estonia and Italy do not agree that work-related organised training is important to develop skills for use in any job.

Some 25% of respondents in Finland, 21% in Italy and 19% in France do not see adult learning and CVET as a route to a better income. Italy (23%) and Greece (20%) are the two countries that disagree most that adult learning and CVET help to reduce unemployment. However, Denmark (13%) is the only country where more than one in 10 respondents disagree that adult learning and CVET are important when looking for a new job.

5.2.2. Personal development and further educational attainment

Some 96% of respondents agree that adult learning and CVET are important for personal development.

Adult learning and CVET are regarded as being as important as education at school and university by 83% of respondents. Malta and Romania (both 92%) are the most positive, Estonia (66%) and Croatia (75%) the least.

Some 73% of all respondents regard adult learning and CVET as a route to a traditional degree, ranging from 84% in Romania and 83% in Malta, to 53% in Italy and 39% in Estonia. Further, 75% of respondents regard adult learning and CVET as primarily for adults who do not have a degree. This view is strongly held in Romania (91%), Greece (88%) and Malta (86%); fewer agree in Czechia (59%) and the Netherlands (44%).

In a sign that systems are becoming more flexible, some 73% of all respondents agree that organised work-related training activities can be used to obtain qualifications recognised by the state. Agreement ranges from 87% in Romania and 85% in Malta, to 54% in Iceland and 56% in Estonia. Further, 78% of respondents agree that there are many ways for adults to obtain a state-recognised degree. Agreement is highest in Germany and Malta (both 86%) and lowest in Slovakia (66%) and Croatia (60%).

5.2.3. Quality of adult learning and continuing vocational training

In all countries, respondents are more likely to describe adult learning and CVET as good rather than bad, except in Italy where 43% say it is good and 48% bad.

Very good ratings are highest in Malta (58%), Ireland (30%) and Austria (23%). Along with Italy, more than a third of respondents in Greece (40%) and Croatia (35%) rate the quality of adult learning and CVET in their country as bad.

5.3. Access

Overall, information provision in Member States about adult learning and CVET opportunities is good; most respondents in all countries seem aware of the opportunities available.

Some 72% of respondents agree that there are many adult learning and CVET opportunities in their country, ranging from 93% in Sweden and 90% in Malta, to 56% in France and 54% in Italy. Perceptions that suitable work-related training activities are easily available are lower. Some 61% of respondents agree that they are easily available, ranging from 78% in Romania, 76% in Malta and 72% in Sweden, to 52% in France and 45% in Italy.

Most respondents (55%) have looked for information on adult learning and CVET opportunities in the 12 months prior to the survey. The highest proportion of respondents looked in Czechia and Spain (both 66%) and fewest in Denmark (42%) and France (34%). Most respondents (66%) also agree that information is easy to find. Respondents in Malta (85%), Romania (82%) and Ireland (both 82%) are most likely to agree, in contrast with Italy (56%), Spain (55%) and France (45%).

When given the option of multiple answers, respondents said that the internet is the best source of advice about adult learning and CVET in all countries except Romania, where professional or sector associations come first. Taken together, the answers indicate that people combine sources, using the internet as a first contact point and to filter information. How different sources are combined varies considerably between countries.

Member States provide various types of support to encourage people to participate in adult learning. However, 52% of respondents said that family and friends was the principal source of support. This was the number one support mechanism in almost all countries. Exceptions are: the Netherlands (60%), the UK (53%) and Norway (46%), where an employer is regarded as most likely to offer support; France (42%), where professional or sector associations are the principal source of support; and Luxembourg (60%), where government is the most frequent response.

Countries vary in their perceptions of government's role in providing support for training. Respondents most likely to say that government would offer support are in Luxembourg (60%), Belgium (48%), Ireland (47%) and Germany (44%); fewer than one in 10 respondents say this in Croatia, Lithuania and Slovakia (all 6%), Estonia and Slovenia (both 7%) and Bulgaria (8%).

In 22 countries, the reason given most frequently for not taking part in organised training is that respondents feel they do not need it. Finland (56%) has most respondents that say they do not participate in adult learning and CVET because they have no need. However, it is also the country where fewest respondents say that they lack technical or general skills for their jobs. In Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Ireland and Malta the main reason for not participating is problems with time; in Romania (37%) and France (36%) it is feeling too old. These seven countries are all above the EU average in the number of respondents who say that they lack technical or general skills.

There is widespread support for measures proposed to encourage participation in adult learning and VET. For example, Ireland (94%), France

(92%), Italy (92%) and Hungary (92%) all strongly support better information and guidance. Many in Spain (95%) and Italy (92%) say improving quality would encourage participation. Hungary (94% and 95% respectively) has the highest number of respondents supporting financial incentives and flexible time arrangements to encourage participation. In Austria (96%), Denmark (92%) and the UK (90%) adapting learning to individual needs is a key issue as is support for childcare in Portugal (95%) and Spain (92%). Certification and recognition of learning is important for several countries, including Belgium (92%), Denmark (89%), Germany (87%), Luxembourg (92%), Portugal (94%) and the UK (90%).

5.4. Image

5.4.1. A positive image of adult learning and CVET

Respondents in all Member States are positive about adult learning and CVET, which they see as bringing benefits for career progression, personal development and further educational attainment.

These positive views also appear to be deeply held, widely shared and reinforced by family and friends, who are major supporters of decisions to participate. They are also consistent; people's motivation for supporting adult learning and CVET is linked to the benefits they expect to receive from them. Such positive views can also be expected to last. Most respondents across all Member States believe that adult learning and CVET will be more important, particularly for career progression over the next 10 years, and that they should be a priority for government investment.

Adult learning and CVET matter and their positive image extends to perceptions of availability and access. Generally, Member States have made information easy to find through many different sources, which people use to various degrees and combine in different ways in different countries.

There are differences in emphasis between countries. Overall, respondents are particularly positive about the benefits of adult learning and CVET in Malta, Cyprus, Romania and Greece, but less so in Italy, Estonia and Croatia.

Views on different aspects of adult learning and CVET also vary. In Malta and Romania, respondents are also positive about quality, availability and access. Respondents in Sweden are positive about the availability and quality of adult learning and CVET; Ireland is also positive about quality.

Respondents in France, Spain and Italy are relatively negative about access to and the availability of adult learning and CVET. In Greece, too, positive views about learning in general are offset by criticisms of access and availability. In Italy, Lithuania and Latvia respondents are critical about quality. Iceland is least positive about access to work-related training.

However, it is important to note that the main differences between ‘positive’ and ‘less positive’ is because fewer people ‘totally agree’ rather than simply ‘agree’. For example, in no country does the combined total of ‘totally agree’ and ‘agree’ fall below 78% for the perception that adult learning and CVET help career prospects, finding a new job and obtaining a better income.

It is unsurprising that, generally, people see adult learning and CVET as ‘good things’. The relative differences identified in the survey reflect relative strengths and weaknesses in their systems for Member States to consider.

For example, high levels of support in all Member States for each measure to encourage people to participate in adult learning and CVET (better information, improving quality, financial incentives, flexible learning arrangements, adapting learning to individual needs, help with caring responsibilities and certification and recognition of learning) indicate scope for Member States either to introduce, widen access to, or raise awareness of them.

It is also important to note that the survey findings report on perceptions; the image may not reflect the reality, in which case misconceptions need to be corrected.

5.4.2. Image and participation

The survey is clear that concerns about not enough people taking part in adult learning and CVET are not because people have a negative image about them.

Despite respondents being clear about their need to constantly update their job-related skills, their concerns over lacking technical and general skills and their strong commitment overall to personal development, the survey reflects that the main reason people do not participate in adult learning and CVET is because they see no need to do so.

However, the survey strongly indicates that seeing no need for adult learning and CVET is not because people hold them in low esteem. Adult learning and CVET may not quite have the same status as tertiary education, but they are highly valued. They are increasingly seen as a necessity. However,

this 'necessity' is seen in general, abstract terms. It can be expressed as people recognising a general need for adult learning and CVET, but they are not necessarily a need for 'me', at least not at this moment.

Consequently, the issue of attractiveness of and participation in adult learning and CVET is not lack of esteem, but of incentive.

The various benefits of adult learning and CVET are interrelated. Learning motivated for personal development can improve career prospects and vice versa. However, any incentive to participate depends on the likelihood of the desired benefits, which people perceive as real, being realised.

The benefits of participating in adult learning and CVET for personal development are defined by the individual and outcomes are in their control. However, although people see adult learning and CVET as helping career progression, job search and better incomes, realising these benefits is generally not in the hands of participants or governments, but of employers. Government measures can encourage people to participate in adult learning and CVET and such measures are needed, but they do not guarantee a job, promotion, or a pay rise.

Governments have more control of certification and recognition of adult learning and CVET. Certification and recognition can be an incentive for learning for personal development and for employment; skills that are certified and visible have more currency on the labour market.

Consequently, in European policy terms, the argument is that government measures to encourage participation need to be linked, not with abstract notions of some general good or deferred reward, but with tangible benefits such as a job or a qualification, or both.

Further, the attractiveness of adult learning and CVET is not only about people's willingness to participate, but also employers' willingness to invest. Employers across Europe say they have difficulties finding the skills they need. However, the impact of technological change on job tasks is creating a tension in adult learning and VET over the balance between the core skills, which employers say they want, and the job-specific skills that employers expect CVET in particular to provide. More opportunities for work-based learning for adults may not only increase participation, but also help resolve that tension.