



# 4

## Participation in Adult Learning: System Characteristics and Individuals' Experiences

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### Introduction

This chapter starts from macro- and micro-level research on participation and inequality in adult education and training. Several system characteristics play a key role in lifelong learning participation: for example, the organization of education; the organization of the labour market and established production modes within firms; quality of child care; the

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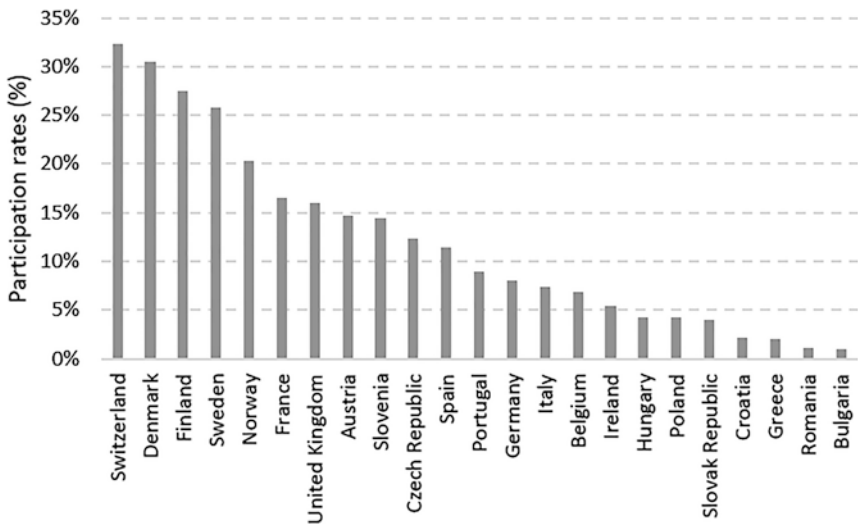
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(perceived) costs of lifelong learning; and the indicators of economic development (Desjardins, 2017; Cabus et al., 2018). Overall, it is argued that these system characteristics particularly restrict low-qualified individuals from accessing lifelong learning (Berman et al., 1998; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2017). These barriers to participation of low-educated individuals may offset the (productivity) advantages of other (often, higher educated) employees' investments in human capital. It is argued by Desjardins (2017) that unequal access to adult education and training (E & T) (in the workplace) is often a reflection of unequal power relations within societies. These unequal power relations promote polarization in the workplace and routinized work, particularly for the low-educated. When low-educated employees engage in routinized work, then this impedes the take-up of novel methods of production, which leads to a decrease in employees' value added in the production process. It therefore seems likely that unequal access to adult E & T in a *polarized world* (Autor et al., 2003; Goos & Manning, 2007; Goos et al., 2009) has a negative impact on society. In line with these arguments, we focus in the first part of this chapter on the (possible) advantages of an inclusive policy on lifelong learning for society as a whole.

Despite observed (and unobserved) structural barriers, small percentages of low-educated adults do participate in education and training (Rubenson, 2018). It is important to learn from them how provision can be strengthened to lower barriers to access. Therefore, we analyse initiatives that aim at raising the participation rate of disadvantaged adults in nine different countries in Europe in the second part of this chapter. These initiatives relate to the European Youth Guarantee and Upskilling Pathway programme. The nine countries under study are very different with regard to their welfare regimes (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009), and, it seems, significantly different in their approaches to adult E & T. The differences include uneven levels of provision and varying participation rates. However, despite the countries' different labour market institutions and other dissimilar system characteristics, learners and staff demonstrate broad *similarities* in participation experiences. It appears that motivation to learn and confidence levels of participants are key to success, in whatever context these individuals engage in adult E & T. This supports arguments for individual support and customization of provision for (young) adults.

## System-Level Determinants of Participation in Adult Learning

In this first part of the chapter, we start from the observation that participation rates in E & T vary between countries, and we explain this situation. Employed individuals comprise most of the adult learners in the European Union, Norway and Switzerland (Eurostat, trng\_lfse\_01). Upon looking at the percentage share of employed individuals aged 20–64 in education or training, we observe a striking dispersion in the participation rates across countries (Fig. 4.1). One likely explanation is that some countries offer a significant amount of adult E & T to employees, while others lag behind in this. Supply is indeed an important determinant of participation in adult E & T. However, this explanation could lead to the false conclusion that offering more adult E & T to employees increases participation rates, regardless of the context in which it is offered or the features of the adult E & T supply system. For example, who would offer courses or training to these employees? Who would pay?



**Fig. 4.1** Participation rates in adult education and training among the employed across countries of the European Union, Norway & Switzerland (Source: Own calculations based on EU LFS (Edition 2017))

Would all employees participate in courses or training regardless of the price? If not, what is *the cure* for those who would or could not pay? Is adult E & T a uniform product, or is it rather adapted to the needs of the job or person (i.e. to the specific goal or field of learning activity)?

In fact, while many barriers to participation in adult E & T can be observed, there are even more *unobserved*. With regards to easily observed determinants of participation, one may think about gender (men are less likely to participate than women) and age (older people are less likely to engage than young people) (Eurostat, *trng\_lfse\_01*). But nuance is crucial. Women have higher learning intentions than men (Sanders et al., 2011) because they are at an increased risk of losing their job compared to men (Elman & Angela, 2002). This suggests that it is employers' actions towards certain socio-demographic groups that increases, or decreases, participation in adult learning. However, many dispositional barriers, like motivation and attitude towards adult learning, are far more difficult to observe (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2017). Previous studies have tried to reveal these barriers, often from the perspective of individuals. Literature argues that participation rates may be low because of time constraints, family reasons or job-related time allocation (situational barriers); the (lack of) provision of adult E & T and who pays for it (institutional barriers); and the psychological needs of the adults to engage—or not—in learning (dispositional barriers) (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009).

In the Enliven project, we recognize that institutions, and education and labour market policies, may impose structural barriers to individuals (see, among others, Cross, 1981; Chapman et al., 2006; Laal & Salamati 2012; Boeren, 2016). It is the environment where we live and raise our children that fosters or limits how barriers play a role in our lives. The interplay between individual determinants and system-level characteristics is difficult to grasp in an empirical model (Boeren, 2017). However, in an attempt to do so, the Enliven project adopted a supra-individual comparative framework covering the multiple layers of this complex problem to reveal the system-level barriers that bind individuals in their decisions to participate in adult E & T (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). We therefore applied generalized structural equation modelling (GSEM) estimation techniques to control for (observed) individual-level (often situational) determinants of participation (Cabus et al., 2018). We aimed

to make participants and non-participants comparable on (observed) background characteristics and then attribute the variation in participation rates between societies to system characteristics.

Our data on adult E & T and system-level characteristics come originally from the European Union Labour Force Surveys (EU LFS edition 2017). These data were collected for the 27 European Union countries (which then included the UK) and Norway. The constructed dataset for the whole of the Enliven project with regard to system-level characteristics covers the years 2011–2016. The empirical framework is applied to European societies at regional level rather than, as is usual, country level (European Commission, 2015; CEDEFOP, 2015; Desjardins, 2017). The European Union Labour Force Survey provides information about NUTS 2<sup>1</sup>-regions. This means we are able to examine the administrative level where regional policies are applied. We argue that system characteristics that play key roles in the organization of education and training can differ between jurisdictions (Eurostat, *reg\_educ\_11*), and this is best captured in a regional-level empirical framework. Moreover, regions have more homogeneous populations than countries. The final dataset comprises more than 200 regions, covering 28 European countries. In addition to the European Union Labour Force Surveys data, we have collected variables from Eurostat, the World Bank, UNESCO and other reliable sources, in one large database with over 80 variables.

Results from GSEM models indicate that observed and, even more significantly, unobserved system characteristics play a key role in explaining the difference in participation rates across societies. Examples of significant system characteristics are: the entrance age into lower secondary education; the age at which compulsory education ends; the (perceived) costs of lifelong learning; and the indicators of economic development (per capita regional gross domestic product and the number of patent applications). However, for some variables, it remains difficult to disentangle individual-level barriers from those at institutional (or system) level. For example, should we consider educational attainment as a

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<sup>1</sup> NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) 2 is the level of regions for the application of EU regional policies; NUTS 2 level regions are also eligible for support from cohesion policy, etc.

personal feature or as a product of society? The way we organize compulsory education, who can access higher education and whether a course or training an adult takes leads to a recognized diploma are all structural features of the education system underlying individuals' educational attainment and their likelihood of further participating in adult E & T.

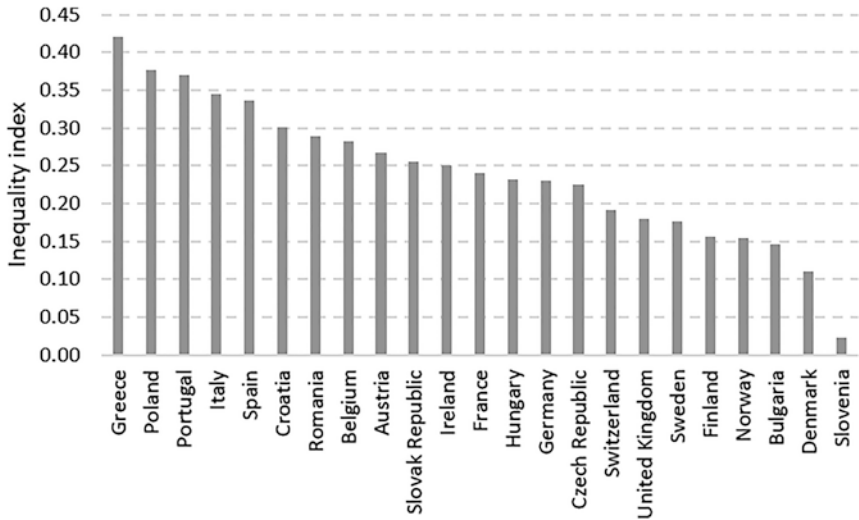
## Inequality in Opportunities and Its Consequences

While previous educational attainment matters for participation in adult E & T, we observe that the highest diploma attained in the initial phase of life also introduces inequality in opportunities over the adult life course. In line with this argument, the Enliven project found that system characteristics restrict low-educated (young) individuals in particular from access to adult E & T. Low-educated (young) adults, who face income pressure, do not choose formal learning pathways as a means to increase their earnings from work, in contrast to the general (middle- or high-educated) workforce. Consequently, there is a discrepancy in the adult participation rates in E & T between the low- and high-educated (Pont, 2004). This calls for more inclusive policies and government actions (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2017).

As Enliven research shows, inclusive policies on lifelong learning (in general, and adult E & T, in particular) have several advantages for society. Lifelong learning has become a recognized EU-28 priority in response to fast-paced technological transformations (Cabus & Stefanik, 2019). However, not everyone is equally able or willing to participate in lifelong learning. In particular, we show that disadvantaged groups are more likely to be excluded from participation, a core concern of the Enliven project. This may have implications for society as a whole. In order to further investigate this claim, we estimate how accessible adult E & T is across different socioeconomic groups and what impact this has on economic growth. In particular, we look at unequal access to lifelong learning between rich and poor, and between low-educated and high-educated. We focus on two disadvantaged groups—the poor and the low-educated—who are at risk of exclusion from the advantages of

*skills-biased* innovation, and increasingly of job loss, obsolete skills, dismissal, long-term unemployment and social exclusion. Whereas in the previous section we focused on the hindrances, or barriers, to participation of disadvantaged adults, this section focuses on the consequences of these impediments for society. While we acknowledge that several indicators of societies' well-being could be of interest to the reader, we particularly look at economic growth. We have already argued from the introduction that unequal access to adult E & T in a polarized world plays a particularly important role for the way production is organized in the workplace. Social imbalances impede the take-up of novel methods of production, as for example, when low-educated individuals cannot access new technologies or digital tools in the workplace and find it more difficult to become productive in fast-changing labour markets. As a consequence of these impediments, individuals (particularly young people) are at risk of long-term unemployment and poverty. If E & T are important determinants of the wealth of nations, then one can reasonably argue that limited and unequal access to E & T affects the channels that have an impact on economic growth. This is discussed below. Lifelong learning is thus not only a matter for the disadvantaged individual, or group, but also for society as a whole; this requires policy action to enhance individuals' prospects and—as a result—societies' wealth. (In the third section of the chapter, we look more closely at the individual level.)

The empirical analysis uses the regional-level dataset obtained from the EU LFS surveys (2011–2016). We retained 23 European countries in the data, or 211 regions. In relation to empirical methods, we applied dynamic panel data estimation techniques and country fixed effects. Panel data estimation techniques are frequently applied in case of threads of reversed causality. Reversed causality implies that economic growth may drive the level and change in adult learning, and not vice versa. Dynamic panel data estimation techniques overcome reversed causality by looking at differences and lags in the levels of adult learning between two consecutive time periods (including recent periods). It is then argued that the economic growth rate we observe today is driven by past movements in adult learning. Additionally, country fixed effects models account for invariant features at the country level over time: for example, the structure of the labour market or the education system.



**Fig. 4.2** Accessibility of adult education and training across countries of the European Union, Norway & Switzerland (Source: Based on figures calculated in Cabus et al. (2019). The Y-axis presents an index that reflects the difference in access to adult E & T between the low-educated and the high-educated. The higher the index, the larger the disadvantage for the low-educated in terms of access to adult E & T. The maximum value is 1)

This makes findings from cross-country (or cross-region) comparisons more likely to be attributed to (changes in) adult learning and not to structural features.

Figure 4.2 presents a measure of inequality in opportunities between socio-economic groups. In this case, the figure plots the inequality of access to adult learning between low- and high-educated employees aged 20–64. We observe that Southern European countries (Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain) face the largest inequalities, while Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway), Bulgaria and Slovenia the least. (The results for Bulgaria should be interpreted with caution: its overall participation rate is very low (see Fig. 4.1), compared to Slovenia and the Nordic countries; Bulgaria shows a more equal access to adult E & T because everyone in Bulgaria, whether high- or low-educated, participates very little.)

We now return to the question of whether unequal access to adult E & T impacts growth. The main results indicate that the growth rate is



significantly reduced (by -0.4 percentage points) when inequality in access to adult E & T between low- and high-educated increases. Societies facing larger dissimilarities in adult learning opportunities across educational levels fare worse than societies with more equal opportunities. This finding is intuitive. Take, for example, innovatory methods of production in firms: high-educated people know how to handle them, but low-educated people cannot acquaint themselves with how to do so—yet these workers remain necessary to the production process. If low-educated people are excluded from on-the-job learning of skills in these new methods of production, process innovations will be counterproductive and not yield the planned results. We also see that inequality in access to adult E & T between low- and high-educated people is worse in societies with high shares of routinized jobs that are at risk from product and process innovations (i.e. automation). It seems that skill-biased technological changes, which mean that technological progress favours the high-educated, are not good for economic growth as a whole.

## Occupational Change

In the previous sections, we examined the differences in participation rates among the employed and inequalities in opportunities and its consequences. In both of these, we explored the role of the workplace in participation in and unequal access to adult E & T. Low educational attainment is found to be an important barrier to participation. The way adult E & T are organized across job typologies or sectors, who can access job-related courses and training (where they are available), and who pays for it, are all structural features of the labour market underlying the likelihood to participate across different levels of educational attainment. The consequences of restricted access to adult E & T are largest for disadvantaged adults if technical change leads to innovations in the production process for which adult learning is required and in which disadvantaged adults cannot engage. The previous section indicated that this has negative consequences for the economy as a whole.

This section explores the underlying linkages between participation in adult E & T and occupational change due to technical progress and digitization (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2017). We further explore the effects of technological transformations, leading to occupational change, on participation across different job typologies. In particular, technological transformations lead to automation of jobs with a high level of routine tasks (Autor et al., 2003; Goos et al., 2003). These are typically executed by low- and middle-skilled workers. At the same time, technological transformation boosts the demand for workers in non-routine complex jobs (Autor et al., 2003; Goos et al., 2003). These workers are expected to invent ways to automate (routine) tasks, often in order to increase productive efficiency. From the data, we argue that professionals who produce and invent new information and communication technologies increase their share in the labour force relative to other professions (CEDEFOP, 2013). In addition, evidence suggests that jobs with high levels of non-routine non-complex tasks are largely unaffected by the introduction of more automation.

Non-routine non-complex jobs, typically carried out by low- and medium-qualified adults, seem hard to automate due to their “human component” which robots still cannot take over. Workers in personal service and personal care are a good example. Tasks they do include caring for patients and elderly people, supervision and assistance for children while parents are at work, and working as a cleaner hairdresser or barber. The demand for personal service and personal care workers, when we control for the business cycle, depends more on demographic ageing and welfare in the region than on technical change (Goos & Manning, 2007; Goos et al., 2014), so that fast-paced technological transformations have little or no impact, at least directly, on the demand for labour (Cabus et al., 2019). Moreover, there is substantial evidence that in many countries, demand for personal service and personal care workers is larger than supply. Looking at the period 2005–2016, employment in this sector grew by about 15% (CEDEFOP, 2016).

Occupational change due to technological progress underlies these employment dynamics in regional labour markets. However, it is not entirely clear what occupational change means for participation in adult

E & T. If the relative share for information and communication technologies professionals increases in a regional labour market, we would expect a rise in adult E & T participation to meet local labour needs. Adult E & T then serves as a tool to educate and train workers with the skills necessary to perform as an information and communication technologies professional. Adult E & T can also be used by information and communication technologies professionals for continuous professional development. If the relative share of personal service and personal care workers increases in a region, we would expect adult E & T to be used to develop skills needed to enter the profession, though it is less clear that adult E & T would be used for continuous professional development. As indicated above, the likelihood of participating in adult E & T is lower for the low-educated than for the high-educated. Personal service and personal care workers typically have low- to medium-level qualifications and sit far below the tertiary educational attainment level of information and communication technologies professionals. Low-educated generally have more negative feelings towards education than high-educated because of poor past experiences in compulsory education (De Witte et al., 2013; Boeren, 2016; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2017). Furthermore, low-educated people receive fewer opportunities in terms of paid educational leave or support from their close environment (Kyndt & Baert, 2013).

In this light, we expected that the goal and field of learning activity to differ substantially across sectors of employment and job typologies for two reasons: (1) different job typologies are differently influenced by external forces that play a significant role in changing job contents and tasks; and (2) different job typologies attract different types of workers (and Cabus et al. (2018) show that worker characteristics matter for participation in adult learning across varying institutional contexts).

In the Enliven project, we explored the extent to which job typologies matter from the perspective of employment dynamics observed in a digital era. In so doing, we tried as far as possible to find causal effects of occupational change on participation in adult E & T by using carefully selected empirical strategies (as explained in Cabus et al., 2019). This demonstrates that variations in participation rates do not only

depend on differences between countries and regions but also on sectors of employment or job typologies. Results that link the observed employment dynamics in the respective information and communication technologies and personal service and personal care sectors to participation in adult E & T indicate that a 100% increase in the level of employment of information and communication technologies professionals is associated with 7.2% greater uptake of job-related courses. An increase in the level of employment of personal service and personal care workers of 100% is associated with 4.5% increase in on-the-job E & T. Further evidence suggests that, while there is no universal increase in participation in adult E & T, regions with more technologically advanced occupational structures show increased intensity of adult learning.

Second, we show that observed employment dynamics influence adult E & T (particularly in workplace learning) through changes in skills demand across the regional labour market. Workplace learning follows demand for labour rather than the reverse, underlining the critique that the European focus on benchmarks and indicators often focuses too much on the supply of skills, neglecting the demand side (Boeren et al., 2019). The results from this mediation analysis indicate that participation in job-related courses is indeed significantly mediated by firms' effective skills demand, particularly among information and communication technologies professionals, and to a lesser extent among personal service and personal care workers. In line with the differing goals and fields of learning activity across job typologies, we argue that job-related courses are offered to personal service and personal care workers as they start working in the job (e.g. as a result of active labour market policies), while information and communication technologies professionals engage in adult learning as a way of raising their skills as required (i.e. as continuous professional development). Given the extent to which the jobs are characterized by differences in educational attainment, this also explains the variation in E & T between low- and high-educated adults and the overall differences in participation observed earlier in this chapter.

## From System-Level Determinants to Individual-Level Experiences

While previous sections have shown *differences* between countries in overall participation rates and access to adult E & T, we are most interestingly also able to show important *similarities* in learning experiences across countries. The second part of this chapter zooms in on the individual experiences of young adult learners in nine different European countries. As argued above, participation rates, and the extent to which countries, regions and workplaces facilitate access to education and training, vary significantly between them. This is true for people in employment, but as mentioned above, those without a job (along with low-qualified adults) tend to be most under-represented in E & T. This is especially problematic for young adults belonging to these groups, given the expectation they will contribute to the economy and society throughout their lives. A young adult aged 25 is expected to work for at least another 40 years before retirement. As such, parts of the Enliven project focused on young low-qualified adults, typically defined as those who do not have an upper secondary education qualification (Boeren et al., 2019).

In what follows, we demonstrate that while adult education systems and participation rates differ significantly between countries, pedagogical practices and the extent to which adults are satisfied with their participation are broadly similar (Boeren et al., 2019). Our central aim was to conduct comparative and international research with younger low-qualified adults and to capture their experiences through qualitative research methods. Based on these learners' insights, combined with data received from staff members working with these young people, we delved deeper into the meaning of participants' experiences, the pedagogical practices applied by educators, and what future actions we might recommend to further optimize their involvement in E & T.

The nine countries involved in this study were Scotland, England, Spain, Italy, Flanders (Belgium), Austria, Estonia, Slovakia and Bulgaria. This part of the project strongly focused on younger vulnerable adults who had left school with no or low qualifications. As explained above, educational attainment remains a major determinant both of

participation in post-compulsory education and of other social, cultural and economic aspects of adults' lives, such as quality of employment (Boeren, 2016). Low-educated adults are, for instance, known to engage less in civic life—for example, they are under-represented among voters in elections (Janmaat, 2017).

The current European lifelong learning landscape is strongly tailored towards increasing economic competitiveness in the neo-liberal marketplace (Holford & Mohorcic Spolar, 2012). Given the poor involvement of adults with no or low qualifications (see above), as a result of the strong focus on learning in the workplace, a first analysis was undertaken to identify what lifelong learning provision is accessible to them. Such provision can be seen as measures to compensate for low-educated adults' having left initial E & T early. This resulted in a typology of seven categories of provision: (1) basic skills and basic education, (2) second chance education at upper secondary levels, (3) post-secondary VET, (4) apprenticeships, (5) training that forms part of Active Labour Market Policies, (6) workplace or job-related learning, and (7) personal or social learning (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018). Some of these types, such as second chance education, lead explicitly to officially recognized qualifications, while others are geared towards enhancing positive learning experiences and increased levels of skills in various areas, including employability (e.g. apprenticeships) and empowerment (e.g. personal or social learning). Given the focus on low-qualified adults, participation in tertiary education was excluded from this exercise. The first two types of provision focus on the need for adults to possess basic skills in numeracy, literacy and problem-solving to cope with the demands of the fast-changing society. Other types concentrate more on the application of these skills to specific work contexts. In line with the structural differences discussed in the first two sections of this book chapter, we found considerable variation in available provision between countries (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018). For example, provision of second chance and basic skills education in Bulgaria is very limited, while core providers for adult basic education operate within the Flemish formal adult education system. In line with previous research evidence on system characteristics in education, the Dutch- and German-speaking countries (Flanders (Belgium) and Austria) scored more strongly than other countries in the provision of

vocationally orientated training. The UK has a wide range of provision in place, but there is also a stronger involvement of private for-profit providers. Southern Mediterranean countries are still developing more robust training initiatives in relation to, for example, apprenticeships. These observations reiterate the points made above: provision of E & T varies significantly across different European countries.

We now move our attention from the structural barriers preventing participation at the societal level to those who—against all odds—succeed in entering E & T of some kind. In following this approach, we can learn from the experiences of learners from within the system.

We approached this research by selecting education and training schemes with commonalities in specific countries that, as demonstrated above, are significantly different from each other in relation to their social, economic, educational and political contexts (Bray et al., 2014). The decision to focus on both (1) ‘empowerment’ for those who lack basic skills and (2) ‘employability’ for those who need help for their future integration into the labour market (i.e. potential outcomes of participation) led us to select two European-wide schemes: (1) Upskilling Pathways and (2) the European Youth Guarantee. Although the provision of E & T varies, these initiatives are coordinated at the European level. Upskilling Pathways, established by the European Commission, starts from the observation that too many adults still lack adequate levels of basic skills such as numeracy and literacy (European Commission, 2016). This prevents them from adequate participation in the labour market and other domains of life. Upskilling Pathways initiatives assess adults’ skills and then refer them to a specific E & T initiative. A final assessment of their skills after training should then lead to an official qualification or proof of these skills.

First introduced in the Nordic countries in the 1980s, the Youth Guarantee aims to make young adults a suitable offer for employment or further education and training within four months (ILO, 2017). This is done through young adults’ involvement in tailored E & T interventions. Following the economic and financial crisis of 2008, with high levels of youth unemployment, especially in countries like Spain and Greece, policy-makers rolled out the Youth Guarantee scheme across Europe. In most countries, adults are eligible up to the age of 25, though in some

this has been extended to 30 because of the high proportion of young people Not in Employment Education or Training (NEETs) in this age group. In 2017, the European Commission claimed to have helped 9 million young people into a job, apprenticeship or traineeship.

The focus on employability and empowerment was chosen as a consistent core concept throughout the Enliven project. In straightforward terms, employability refers to the ability to gain and maintain employment. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) argued that employability results not only from individual factors but also needs to be understood as an interaction with external factors. From an individual perspective, people can increase their employability through a range of attributes such as social skills, reliability, assertiveness, time management skills, gaining formal and vocational qualifications and building work experience. Nevertheless, someone's employability might be affected by characteristics like their age and health. Furthermore, lack of flexibility to move to another area or to shift working hours can constrain employability, especially among personal service and personal care workers. This is strongly linked with personal circumstances such as combining work with family responsibilities and access to resources such as social capital and informal networks. Nevertheless, demand factors need to be taken into account as well. Adults may have strong individual attributes but may be limited by the lack of opportunities in the labour market. As demonstrated in the first section of this chapter, not all countries or regions are equally successful in providing support for employment. Benefit systems and Active Labour Market policies have been developed to varying extents, and adult learning significantly differs across job typologies. Given these stark contrasts, we sought to explore whether participants in a similar scheme across Europe experience their participation differently.

The term empowerment, our second focus, has been defined in different ways by various scholars (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). Narayan (2005, p. 3) points out that it is often used as a synonym for concepts like 'autonomy, self-direction, self-determination, liberation, participation, mobilization and self-confidence'. In relation to education, empowerment is important in people's striving towards situations where they can make their own decisions and deal with the barriers that come their way. Within this debate, possessing good levels of knowledge and basic skills



have been mentioned by various authors (Agudo & Albornà, 2011; Hennink et al., 2012; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Özmete, 2011). The link between empowerment and literacy levels has received particular attention (for example, from Duckworth & Brzeski, 2015).

We therefore focused on basic skills like literacy and numeracy to investigate E & T in relation to empowerment. It is core to the European Commission Upskilling Pathways scheme. Results from the Survey of Adult Skills (part of the OECD's Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies) suggested 35 million adults in Europe lack basic skills required to cope with the demands of the knowledge-based economy (OECD, 2016). The European Commission, keen to address this, has been active in implementing Upskilling Pathways across the Member States.

Because each has relatively uniform aims across Europe, the Youth Guarantee and Upskilling Pathways schemes were chosen for detailed case study work which were labelled as policy trails (Boeren et al., 2019).

## The Policy Trail Method

The policy trail methodology, developed by colleagues in the “LLLight in Europe” project (Melo & Holford, 2015), is used to explore elements of adult learning in companies. In a globalized world, education and other social policies are constructed through complex processes and involve a range of actors. We wanted to explore how policies for increasing adults' employability and empowerment ‘travel’—how they are adopted, adapted and implemented by different actors, and whether this varied in different contexts with varying levels of access to E & T. Our qualitative fieldwork was modelled accordingly, adopting a multilevel angle throughout, and involving local policy makers, staff working in and managing education and training institutions, and the young adult learners themselves.

As already pointed out above, in each country the Enliven team selected two training programmes, one to represent the Youth Guarantee and the other, Upskilling Pathways. As details of the latter scheme were announced only a couple of months before the start of our fieldwork, partners were allowed to select programmes that represented similar aims,

such as basic skills courses: a list of potential programmes incorporating Upskilling Pathways aims was distributed among consortium members. Within these, adult learners were selected for semi-structured in-depth interviews. In accordance with the scope of this part of the Enliven project, the focus was on low-educated adults, acknowledging the increased chance of their having accumulated disadvantages such as being on a low income, living in a deprived area, coming from a minority ethnic background group, being in care or having adverse health conditions (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018). Staff members working with these adults, and a local policy maker, were also interviewed.

Semi-structured interview guidelines were developed for all partners to semi-standardize data collection, as the nine countries were known to have dissimilar system-level characteristics. Adult learners were asked to talk about the barriers they had to overcome before enrolment, their experiences of being an adult learner and whether they expected some beneficial outcomes as a result of their participation. Practitioners were asked to provide detailed information about the wider social, economic and institutional contexts in which the programmes took place, the difficulties they had dealt with in making programmes successful, the ways in which they measured the effectiveness and success of the training interventions, and what suggestions they had for the future. The local policy maker was interviewed to provide further contextual information.

Guidelines for data analysis and a common reporting template were distributed among partners. The coordinating team responsible for this element of the project undertook comparative analysis of results, looking for similarities and differences between countries.

## **Different Systems, Broadly Similar Experiences**

As extensively discussed above, different countries have varying levels of participation in adult E & T. Exploring the details of the selected employability programmes across the nine countries revealed many similarities in types of training provided and pedagogical methodologies. Often, individual activities such as counselling, career guidance and work placements are combined with group activities for basic, social and job-specific

(including technical or job searching) skills training. Interestingly, programmes studied as part of the policy trails on empowerment demonstrated strong parallels not only between countries but also with those analysed in relation to employability. While we were explicit in being interested in the empowerment aspect of the selected programmes under (or having aims similar to) the Upskilling Pathways initiative, selected initiatives seemed to emphasize the need for young adults to find employment. This was found regardless of country. Programmes studied as part of the empowerment trail tended to focus primarily on basic skills but often applied to work-related contexts. This strongly underlines the vocational and economic orientation of Europe's education and training policies as discussed elsewhere in this book.

The characteristics of the young adults taking part in both employability and empowerment initiatives were also very similar, across both the countries and the two schemes. Participants tended to be unemployed, to belong to the NEET category, and to live with multiple disadvantages such as poor mental health and poverty. Project partners interviewed young adult learners from different backgrounds, including refugees and, in Bulgaria, from Roma communities. Many of the interviewees, across countries and schemes, bullied at school, had become disengaged with education. For some, this led to alcohol and drug addictions and had a negative effect on their self-esteem and confidence. The idea of young low-educated adults suffering from accumulated disadvantages was strongly confirmed within the group of learners selected. An overview of their cumulative disadvantages as analysed through a WordCloud activity can be found in Fig. 4.3. The figure on the left represents learners' background characteristics from the Youth Guarantee; that on the right, from Upskilling Pathways. Despite differences in participation rates between countries, learners with these characteristics of disadvantage were present across the different country samples, indicating that each country does attract them to a *certain* extent, though absolutely not to a *similar* extent.

In terms of outcomes, while the programmes in all the countries had a very strong work-related focus, most young adults reported that increasing self-worth and confidence in their own abilities was the most important outcome of their participation. This was again a consistent finding across the various countries. While we were at first surprised that most



**Fig. 4.3** Cumulative disadvantages of participants in Youth Guarantee (left) and Upskilling Pathways (right) (Source: WordCloud based on Enliven data)

empowerment policy trails had a vocational orientation, the training provided did seem to have an empowering effect. This also held true for participants interviewed within the policy trails on employability and again this was fairly consistent across the nine countries.

Delving deeper into the experiences of staff members working with these young adults, it became clear that there was a trend among practitioners to complain about the lack of funding they received. Given the clients' cumulative disadvantages, many need more individualized and tailored support. Youth workers and training staff, again across Europe, tended to perceive themselves as underpaid, and the feeling of financial pressure appeared as a common theme throughout the interviews. Several interviewees mentioned the high levels of courage and motivation needed to survive in their jobs as social workers and youth educators.

In order to run initiatives under the Youth Guarantee or Upskilling Pathways, most of the coordinating E & T agencies require external funding. Across Europe, in many countries, governments have not made adequate investments in E & T, which has led to some countries—for example, those in Eastern Europe—becoming over-dependent on funding streams such as the European Social Fund. This generates a number of problems, and E & T initiatives tend to be short-term and not backed up by structural changes in the countries' long-term policy planning.

Longer term follow-up of participants is hardly ever undertaken for programmes that run as one-off funded initiatives, leaving us in the dark on how young people fare in the medium term after leaving the organization. This makes it hard to judge the effectiveness of the interventions and their longer term impact on these young adults' lives. Valid and reliable evaluation and outcome data for these and related programmes were very difficult to find. As such, the claim that the Youth Guarantee has helped 14 million young adults in Europe to escape youth unemployment for an extensive period of time is hard to confirm (European Commission, 2019a). Regardless of the Youth Guarantee, a period of economic growth after the financial crisis might have resulted in higher levels of employment in any case. These initiatives underline strongly the complexity of the situation and the need for a focus on the supply side.

Another problem with the over-reliance on external funding is that often these schemes require evidence of previous success. During our data analyses, and in wider discussions within the consortium, we discovered the prevalence of 'parking and creaming' approaches, with practitioners telling us they selected young adults for their programmes only when they were confident they would do well. Such 'cherry-picking' boosts a provider's statistics and reputation, enabling it to attract more funding in future. However, it is especially problematic given the already low participation rates among low-educated adults with cumulative disadvantages and because countries with the lowest overall participation rates are also those most dependent on external funding. Confronting such people with further difficulties means that those furthest from the labour market and full participation in society will remain under-represented in lifelong learning.

## Conclusions

This chapter has explored participation in E & T from both system- and individual-level perspectives. It is clear that participation rates significantly vary according to countries and between adults from distinct socio-economic groups. In relation to unequal participation, we have demonstrated that structural-level features are strongly embedded in

individual-level outcomes. Adults' engagement with E & T is the result not only of individuals' willingness or ability to participate but also of macro-structural system characteristics. Our approach was in line with Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), who used the notion of Bounded Agency, and indicated the need for multilevel approaches in understanding of participation. We explored this issue specifically for low-educated adults, a group strongly underrepresented in adult education (Rubenson, 2018).

The European Commission stimulates participation in education and training through soft governance measures, notably benchmarks and indicators. Country-level statistics reveal low levels of participation in many Eastern and Southern European countries. Levels of inequalities in access are also strongest in these countries. The European Commission's attempt to counterbalance these statistics has been the implementation of Europe-wide schemes, such as the Youth Guarantee and Upskilling Pathways. These draw on European funding, mainly through the Youth Employment Initiative and the European Social Fund. While these initiatives have undoubtedly helped a significant group of young adults to access education and training, it remains unclear how far they have helped to build stronger levels of adult education provision in low-performing countries. Enliven analyses (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018) revealed that countries with poor participation rates have weak levels of provision in basic skills and second-chance education, as well as vocational provision such as apprenticeships. From our qualitative work, we know that the experiences of learners in these European schemes are similar, and that they use broadly similar pedagogical methods. We agree with Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) and Boeren (2016) that breaking down barriers to participation needs action at different levels. While adults need to understand the benefits of lifelong learning, they have difficulties accessing systems that are underfunded and provide a limited range of training options. The European Agenda for Adult Learning encourages a better-balanced landscape in relation to supply and take-up of E & T, but a recent stocktaking report strongly underlines the need to invest more directly in basic skills education (European Commission, 2019b). Our research supports this conclusion: it is necessary to help the most disadvantaged adults in society. We also endorse the stocktaking report's

conclusion that building stronger lifelong learning systems in Member States requires a valid and reliable evidence base: this implies stronger evaluation mechanisms for European initiatives such as Upskilling Pathways.

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