

Lifelong learning to extend working life

Participation in education and learning among people in the age group 55+ in the Baltic Sea Region and how we can increase it.

POLICY BRIEF #9
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BALTIC SEA LABOUR FORUM
FOR SUSTAINABLE WORKING LIFE



SUMMARY

For workers to have the possibility to extend their working lives, access to lifelong learning opportunities is of key importance. Here, we focus on learners aged 55+ in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). The countries in the BSR show great heterogeneity in terms of participation levels in lifelong learning in this age group. We look at possible explanations for this through the perspective of different types of barriers to lifelong learning – dispositional, situational, and institutional – and we propose a range of policy initiatives to address them.

Introduction

Access to upskilling, re-skilling, training and learning throughout our working lives is of vital importance for all of us to be able to remain in today's deeply and rapidly transforming labour market. It is also considered a social right in the EU through the European Pillar of Social Rights, which enshrines the right to education, training, and lifelong learning as its first principle. Looking at the working population aged 55+, lifelong learning is of prominent importance as a factor that can contribute to policies for extending working life. Furthermore, research indicates that learning contributes to active ageing, benefitting both mind and body (Narushima et al., 2018).

There are, however, barriers to accessing lifelong learning that, according to research, are greater among people with lower education, lower paid jobs and among older individuals (OECD, 2019). These are thus the groups that need to be specifically addressed in policy responses related to lifelong learning.

Defining the concept of lifelong learning

Lifelong learning can be seen as an organising principle of education that has been growing in importance globally in response to socio-economic changes, the advancement of information and communication technologies, and the growth of a so-called knowledge-based societies (UNESCO, 2016). However, the definitions and conceptions of what lifelong learning entails differ between countries (Ibid.). Here, we adopt the EU definition, which refers to lifelong learning as "all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within personal, civic, social or employment-related perspectives" (Eurostat, 2021). Learning activities include both formal and non-formal learning. (See text box for EU classification of learning activities.)

Defining adult learning

We will here concentrate on adult learning, which refers to the participation in lifelong learning by adults. We adopt OECD's definition of adult learning as formal, non-formal and informal learning of adults who have completed their initial education and entered working life (OECD, 2020). Adult learning is, by definition, less homogenous and regulated when it comes both to who is funding it, the target groups and institutional structures (Desjardin, 2020). Most adult learning takes place at the work place, either as non-formal or formal on-the-job training (OECD, 2019).

EU classification of learning activities 2016

Formal education and learning: institutionalised, intentional, and planned through public organisations and recognised private bodies, constitute the formal education system of a country.

Non-formal education and training: institutionalised, intentional, and organised/planned learning activities outside the formal education system (courses, seminars and workshops, private lessons or instructions and guided on-the-job training).

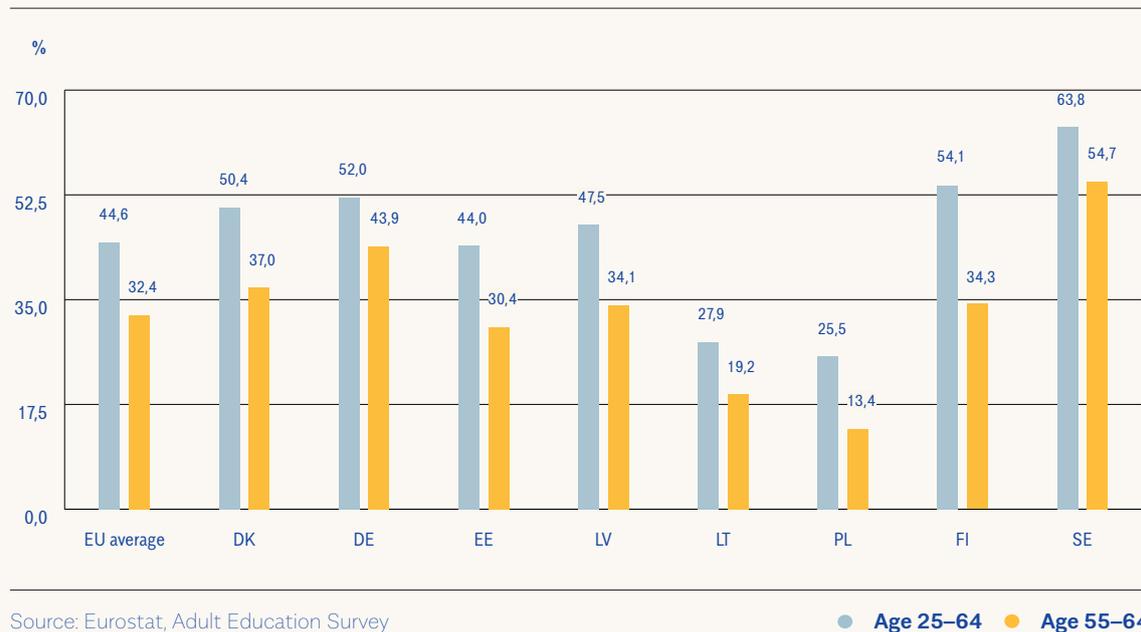
Informal learning: learning activities that are not institutionalised and can take place anywhere (family, friends, etc.) They can be both intentional and non-intentional.

Participation rates in education and training are lower in the age group 55–64 and vary greatly in the Baltic Sea Region

The target of the action plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights is that 60% of all adults (age 25–64) in EU countries would participate in training on a yearly basis by 2030. This figure was at 44,6% in 2016, which

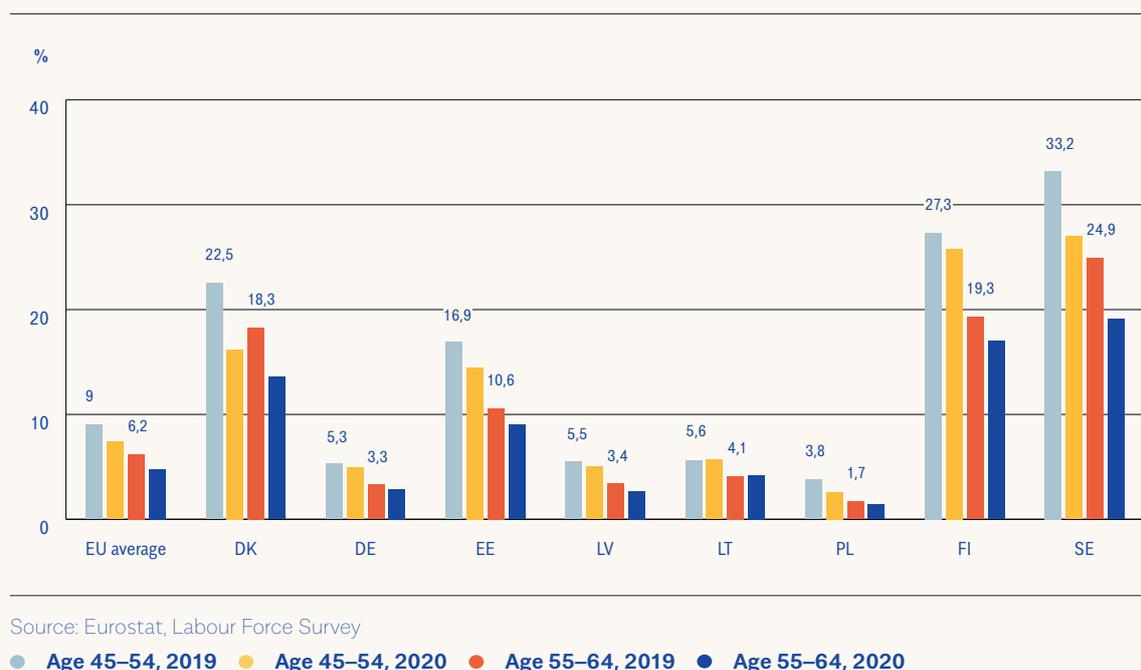
is the most recent available yearly data collected in the EU Adult Education Survey. The average participation rate in the age group 55–64 in 2016 was 12 percentage lower, at 32,4 %, as illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1. Participation rate in education and training by age, 2016



Looking at figures from the Labour Force Survey, in which respondents are asked if they participated in training or education the last 4 weeks before the survey, participation rates are understandably lower than in the Adult Education Survey. Differences between countries in the BSR are also more significant in this survey, as illustrated in figure 2. If the EU average participation rate in training and education was at 6,2 % in 2019 in the age group 55–64, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland demonstrated very low participation rates – between 1,7 and 3,3 % – in this age group. Here, the Nordic countries stand out with considerably higher participation rates: between 18,3 and 24,9 %. Both the years of 2019 and 2020 are included in figure 2, to illustrate a potentially negative impact of the Covid pandemic on participation in training and education.

Figure 2. Participation rate (%) in education and training (last 4 weeks) by age, 2019 and 2020



High welfare spending correlates with high participation rates in adult learning

Why do the Nordic states stand out with so much higher participation rates in education and learning compared to other countries in the region? One explanation is linked to the type of welfare regime that is prevalent in these countries. (See text box for a classification of welfare regimes.) Comparative research illustrates links between welfare spending and participation rates in adult learning (Desjardin 2020). The countries of Finland, Denmark and Sweden, which all have high welfare expenditure, also show to be most successful in reaching the most disadvantaged groups with organised adult learning opportunities and show the highest levels of overall participation in adult learning (Desjardin, 2020). In these countries, not only the barriers to participation in learning and education are lower, but individuals are also assisted in overcoming a range of barriers to participation in education and learning (Rubenson and Desjardins, 2009).

Gøsta Esping-Andersen distinguishes between **three types of welfare regimes**, which are based on two dimensions: de-commodification (degree to which individual can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation) and stratification (degree to which the welfare state degrades or preserves inequalities).

Liberal welfare state (i.e. Unites States): encourages market solutions to social problems, shows low de-commodification and low stratification.

Conservative welfare states (i.e., Germany): shaped by traditional family values, state assistance only step in when the family's capacity to aid its members is exhausted. High degree of stratification and moderate degree of de-commodification.

Social democratic welfare states (i.e., Sweden, Finland): high degree of de-commodification, universalistic systems that promote an equality of high standards, rather than an equality of minimal needs. Low stratification.

Source: Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, 1990.

Barriers to accessing LLL among older workers

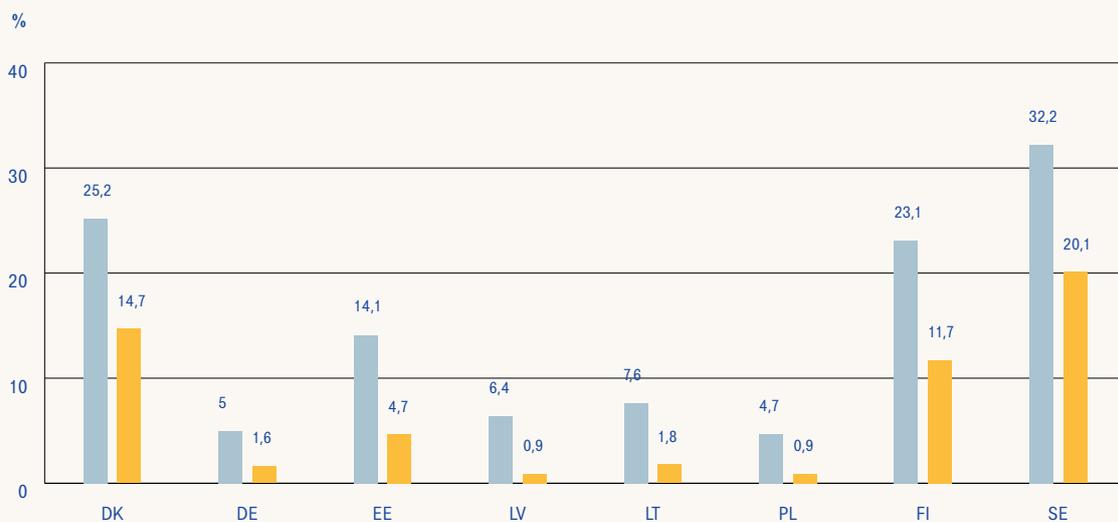
What are the barriers to participation rates in lifelong learning among people in the age group 55–64? It is possible to differentiate between barriers of dispositional, situational, and institutional character. (See i.e. Boeren 2017, Roosmaa and Saar, 2016).

Dispositional barriers – attitudes and self-perceptions

Dispositional barriers are related to attitudes and self-perceptions of learners about themselves. Research indicates that dispositional barriers are stronger among older, low-educated adults, as well as low-skilled and blue-collar workers (Roosmaa and Saars, 2016). Looking at people aged 55+, the perception that one is too old for learning and education constitutes one of these barriers. Lacking self-confidence and motivation are other barriers. Research further indicates that previous experience in education is of vital importance: dispositional barriers tend to be greater among people that have had a negative initial experience from education (i.e. Mooney and Rourke, 2017)

Statistics indicate that **educational attainment levels** have a major effect on participation rates in training and education later in life. Those who have completed longer educations are also more prone to go back to learning again. As illustrated in figure 3, participation rates in education and training in the age group 55 to 74 in 2019 was consistently higher among people with tertiary education compared to persons with upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary educations in all BSR countries. Policy efforts towards increased participation in adult education and learning should thus focus on the less-educated groups.

Figure 3. Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks), from 55 to 74, by educational attainment level, 2019



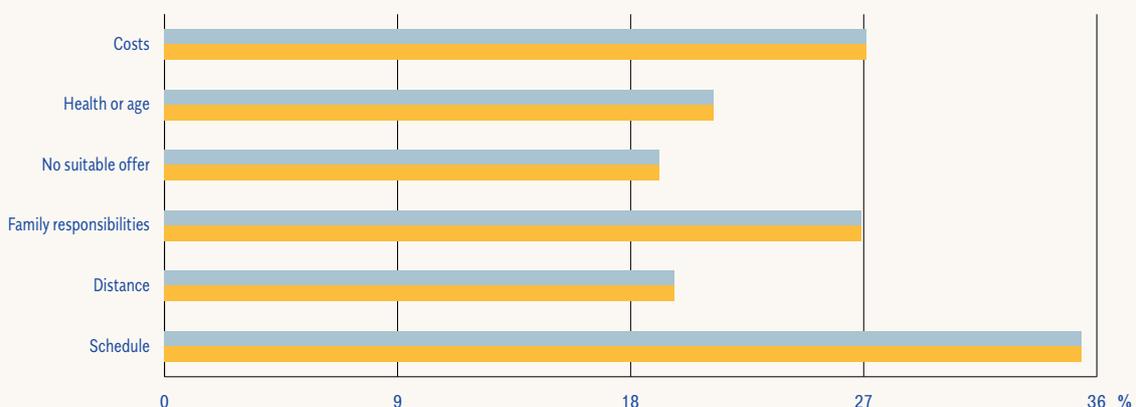
Source: Eurostat

● Tertiary education ● Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education

In a country comparison of responses to the Adult Education Survey in the EU, researchers found that, compared to for example the Nordic countries, dispositional barriers were much stronger in the Baltic countries, where age, health and lack of confidence was perceived as the biggest barriers to adult learning (Roosmaa and Saars, 2016). Some of the reasons for this, researchers assume, are negative experiences from initial education that has shaped cognition of social disadvantage and learning dispositions. Furthermore, a traditional understanding of education dominates in these countries, where education is received at school and learning completed at university, while adult learning only take place at work.

Also, negative attitudes of employers towards older employees might be a dispositional barrier. Participation in training and education is an investment in the future, both for employers and employees. For older adults, the shorter pay-back time for this investment might be seen as an obstacle to participating in learning (Martin 2018). This could thus be seen as a barrier both at organisational and individual levels. However, with longer working lives, also this investment time becomes longer and there is thus need for a change in attitudes also among employers towards older workers and their right to training and education.

Figure 4. Self-employment as percentage of employment, by age groups, 2020



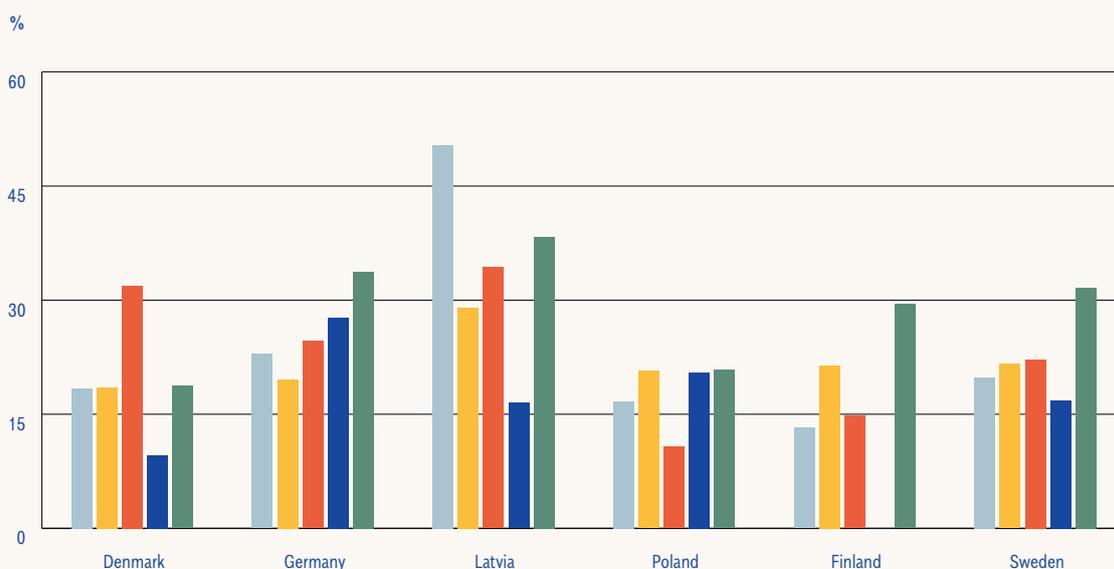
Source: Eurostat, Adult Education Survey

● Age 25-54 ● Age 55-64

Situational barriers – income, family responsibilities, employment status.

What are the situations that older workers could find themselves in that would hinder them from participating in learning and education? Family responsibilities, such as care of children and elderly, is a clearly gendered barrier, thus more prevalent among women than men. Other situational barriers are related to allocation of time for one's job, but also factors such as income, being employed or not and one's working history. Lack of digital skills can also negatively impact participation in learning activities among older people, as learning methods today are intrinsically connected to digitalisation (OECD, 2017).

Figure 5. Main reasons for not participating in education and training, 55–64, 2016



Source: Eurostat, Adult Education Survey

● Costs ● Health or age ● No suitable offer ● Family responsibilities ● Schedule

Institutional barriers – costs, access, information

Older learners may also face institutional barriers. Lack of provision or opportunity to education and learning, timing of provision, high costs, high entry qualifications, or a general lack of flexibility are all examples of institutional barriers that can discourage older learners. In the Nordic countries, where there is public financial support for education and training, the institutional barrier related to costs of participation in education and learning is low, in contrast to other countries in the region. Access to available learning opportunities is not equal among all, neither is the information that people receive about these available opportunities. At the same time, the offer should be adapted to recognise the differences between groups, thus the offer of learning opportunities should also be individualised, research points out (Boeren, 2017).

A complex interaction of barriers at different levels

Barriers at micro-level, i.e. dispositional barriers, do not exist in vacuum, but it could be argued that when the Nordic welfare states introduce targeted policy measures at macro-level, designed to assist adults in overcoming barriers, these measures might also positively affect the subjective rationality of adults and thus the perspective on opportunity structure (Rubenson and Desjardins, 2009, Roosmaa and Saars, 2016).

Policy implications

The **existing inequalities** regarding participation in education and learning need to be **addressed** and **support to be focused on those who need it the most**: unemployed, low-educated, low-skilled with risk of having their jobs disappearing due to technological change.

Targeting and outreach activities are important tools for tackling inequality and disadvantage. These are to be **non-market-based activities, led by the state**

National social policy, institutional and public policy frameworks also play an important role, such as public support for education and active labour market policies

Alignment with labour market needs through increased dialogue between the labour market and educational institutions. The offer of training and learning needs to respond to the actual needs of the labour market.

National lifelong learning systems must increase their flexibility to be able to **adapt quickly to digital changes** and to the opportunities and challenges these changes can create.

Quality of the offer and labour market outcomes. Training and learning should be of relevance and good quality, leading to increased employability.

The high number and heterogeneity of educational providers makes the need for proper **mechanisms to assure quality**.

Also recognise the importance of non-formal learning

Advocacy activities to 'open the eyes' of those who do not see any need of learning or training – that is **go beyond those who actually ask for opportunities to participate in learning and training**, thus focus on changing perceptions about LLL and the notions of what it means to participate.

Cooperation between employer and employee has to be the guiding light for the company strategy in competence development. In other words, it is both the employer and the employees that plan activities for competence development in close cooperation.

The right to free guidance for everyone that may result in education within the formal education system or learning within the non-formal system.

The **availability of career counselling for adults must be guaranteed and expanded** to strengthen the individuals in making conscious and well-informed choices throughout their working life. Digital ways for a more flexible and easily accessible career counselling must be further investigated.

Good advice and service adapted to personal needs, provision of a learning environment where the adult feels comfortable, this all contributes to building the learner's self-esteem and faith in their abilities.

Learning to learn competence – the ability to pursue and persist in learning, to organise one's own learning – is essential in the rapidly changing labour market.

Digital skills for everyone. The adult learning systems should **take into account the wide disparity in the population's digital skills** levels and be able to provide adequate training for each individual.

The accessibility of the offer is of key importance, as equal access is an important right. Age limitations should be removed.

Employers' crucial role: need to **strengthen the incentive mechanisms** for them to encourage their further investments on competence development of employees. There is also need to **change stereotypical ageist views among employers**, in relation to provision of training and learning to older workers.

Improved educational information may improve the employers' and employees' possibilities to orientate themselves in the educational opportunities. An idea could be creating **one clear entry to existing education and training: a platform**, compiling all possible ways of advancing one's competencies.

In companies a proper analysis of the **overall needs for competence must be the basis for the choice of strategies** for the provision and the development of competence. On the individual level this means informed choices of education – throughout the entire lifespan.

Skills and competence mapping is needed to ensure better targeted competence development.

Recognition of Prior Learning. Structured education and training pathways need to take **prior learning into account** and support learners appropriately in their further learning. Awareness of one's own competences through documentation supports positive self-esteem and motivates further personal and professional development.

Mechanisms for supporting transnational exchange in the BSR to be strengthened with the purpose to make them more regular and systematic. This is for the growth of the whole region in the field of adult learning, as possibilities to share and learn are important.

The social partners are important contributors when it comes to competence policy and long-term strategy development. Several countries in the regions have developed national competence policies based on a dialogue among the sectors of education, work and social security sector.

A **national policy for qualifications and skills with a central role for the social partners.** There is a need for a comprehensive policy to strengthen the perspectives for lifelong and life wide learning. When developing a national qualifications and skills policy, tripartite partnership must be guaranteed for accuracy, legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

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