

**Praline** 



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# PRALINE

PROJECT SURVEY  
ADULT LEARNING IN  
EUROPE

AoC Survey  
**2022/23**



# PRALINE PROJECT SURVEY

## ADULT LEARNING IN EUROPE

Promoting Adult Learning in Networks (PRALINE) project is a partnership made up of 11 partner organisations in 10 European countries. Each partner organisation represents vocational education and training (VET) centres, schools or colleges. In most cases this is national representation and in some it is regionally. Whilst the primary objective of the project is the establishment, development and strengthening of the partners' networks, it is achieved through the prism of best practice and raising the profile of adult education in Europe.

This survey was developed as part of the project's work to ascertain the level of participation by adults in education and training within the project partnership countries, their motivations for further learning, their barriers to accessing it and the importance of promoting adult learning.

### **ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

The survey provides a reflection or 'snapshot' of a range of participants who were available, during the surveying period, to complete it. These are the views and opinions of individual institutions within the membership of the individual partners involved in the project. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the project partners.



## RESPONSES

| Country                       | Number of responses |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| Croatia                       | 20                  |
| Estonia                       | 21                  |
| Finland                       | 11                  |
| France                        | 52                  |
| Netherlands                   | 17                  |
| Portugal                      | 31                  |
| Republic of Ireland           | 13                  |
| Slovenia                      | 14                  |
| Spain                         | 57                  |
| UK                            | 53                  |
| <b>Total survey responses</b> | <b>289</b>          |

### **COVID aside, has your organisation seen significant changes in enrolments of adult learners over the last 10 years?**

Some of the countries had high numbers of institutions saying that their adult enrolments had increased in the last 10 years. **For example, Estonia (81%), Finland (64%), Netherlands (76%) and Spain (61%)** had all seen growth in adult learner participation. However, there were many who had seen a more significant decline in participation with **Croatia (42%), Portugal (48%), Slovenia (50%) and the UK (53%)** having seen some decline. **France and the Republic of Ireland** had a fairly even split between increase, decline and participation remaining the same.

It should be noted that the data in these samples do not fully match the national data (all participants and providers) published by Eurostat based on the [Labor Force Survey and Adult Learning Survey](#).

## **If you have seen an increase in participation, which groups have increased significantly in comparison to the previous period?**

**Certain countries experienced an increase in participation from immigrants, asylum seekers and/or refugees with Slovenia (43%), UK (45%), Portugal (56%), Finland (57%) and Ireland with a substantial 80%.**

Whilst most of the partner countries had levels of NEET (not in education, employment, or training) participation that had increased by around the 20% or less mark, **Spain has slightly bucked the trend with a 37% increase in participation of NEETs.**

Most countries have reported that they've seen increases in or around the 40% mark in terms of people with low levels of education. The most significant increases for this category are in the **Republic of Ireland (60%), Portugal (63%) and Estonia (65%).**

In terms of increased participation by women, most of the countries have seen some steady increases, however **Croatia has seen an increase in participation of women of 54%.**

Those older people in the workplace have seen particularly small increases in participation in **France (8%) and Portugal (7%).** Elsewhere those increases have been between around 14% and 30%, however there have been significant increases **Netherlands 54%, Spain (58%) and Estonia (70%).** One reason for Estonia's significant increase in older workers participating may be their comprehensive move to a digital society and the requirement for older people to have digital skills for work and life. Many of those responding from other countries in the free text gave reasons such as needing to retrain or upgrade knowledge and skills for their jobs.

Not all countries reported an increase in participation for people with disabilities but those that did reported increases that ranged from **5% (Spain) to 29% (UK).**

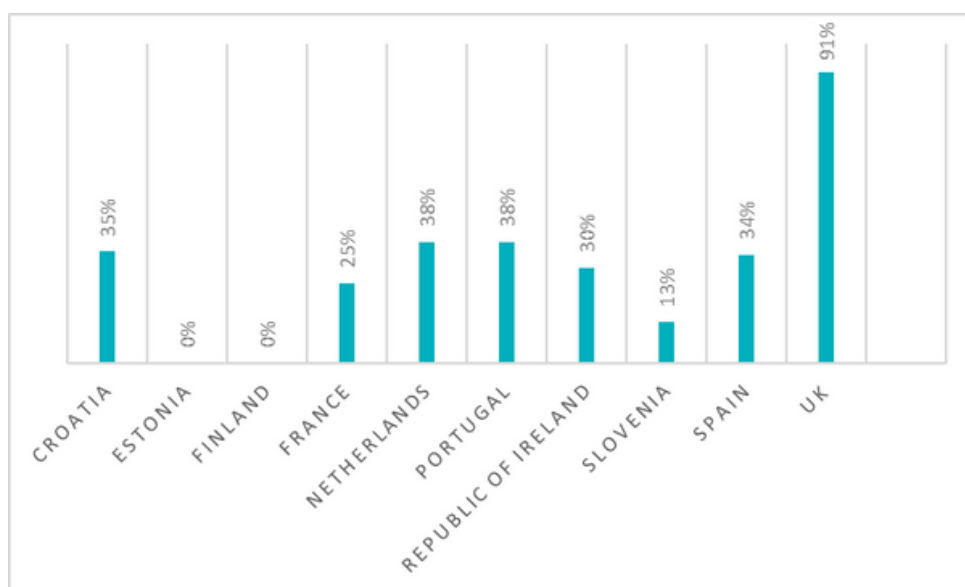


Other reasons given for increased participation in adult learning were varied and appear to respond to specific and sometimes niche local need. In Croatia one institution had seen a particular increase in learners from local family farms. More often, and especially in the institutions in France, the main other reason was employees needing retraining. Portugal also appears to have seen an increase of recent graduates not able to get jobs and needing to access other skills training. One Spanish institution reported the effects of the Covid pandemic on the hospitality sector where staff who lost their jobs had to retrain. An adult education college in England (UK) reported that any potential increase is restricted by government funding criteria in England having become narrower.

### What proportion of your adult learners are studying at EQF Level 1?

Institutions in **Estonia** and **Finland** report that they have no learners studying/training at EQF Level 1. **UK institutions (91%)** have the most adult learners at Level 1. Institutions responding in most other partnership countries have below 40% of learners at Level 1.

It should be noted that the partners in this project are mainly engaged in vocational training at EQF levels 3-4. This is an analysis of participation in this particular Erasmus project network, not a representative analysis of participation at national levels.

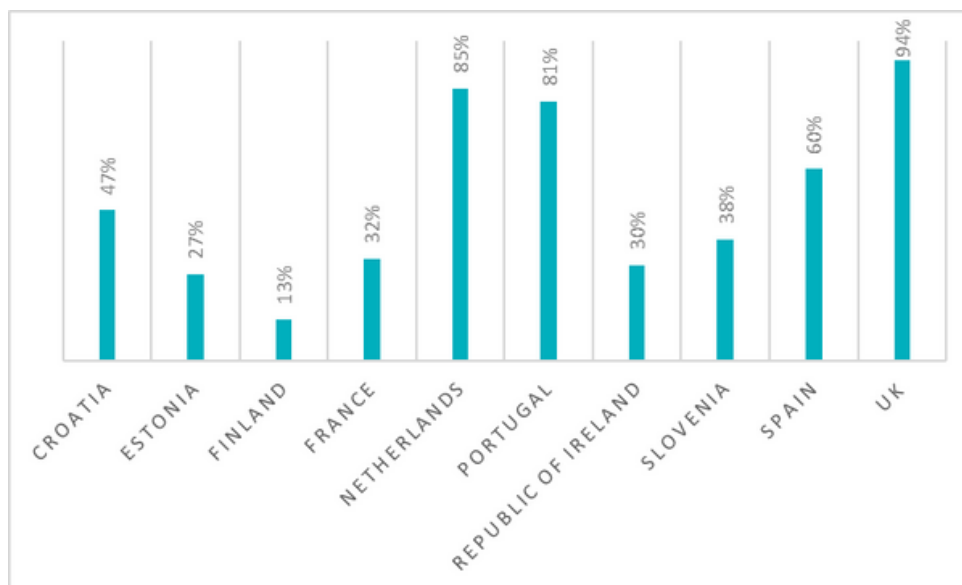


Percentage of institutions from partnership countries saying they have adult learners at EQF level 1



## What proportion of your adult learners are studying at EQF Level 2?

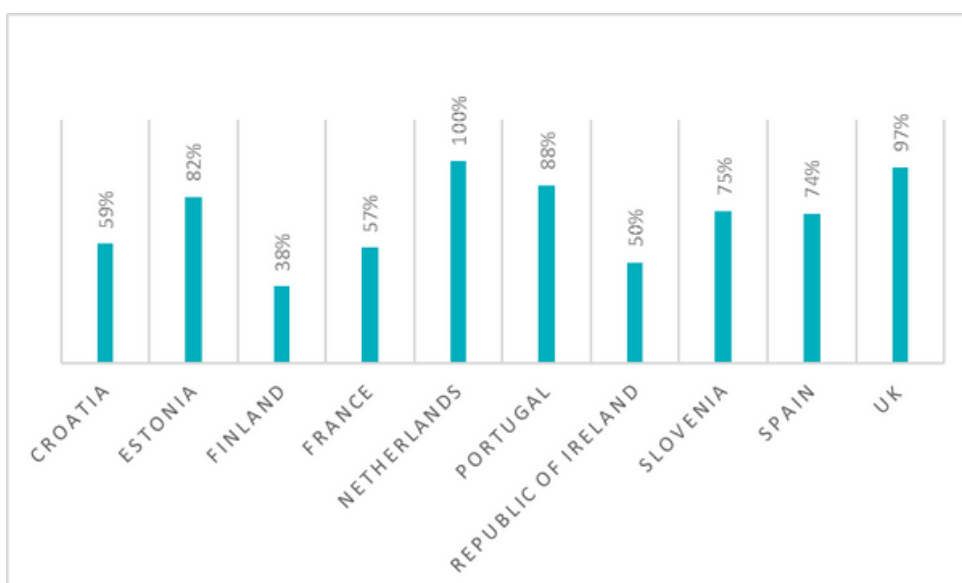
In Institutions in **Finland (13%)**, **Estonia (27%)** and **Ireland (30%)** report that they have fewer learners studying or training at EQF Level 2. **UK institutions (94%)**, again, have the most learners at Level 2 in comparison to other countries, followed by the **Netherlands (85%)** and **Portugal (81%)**.



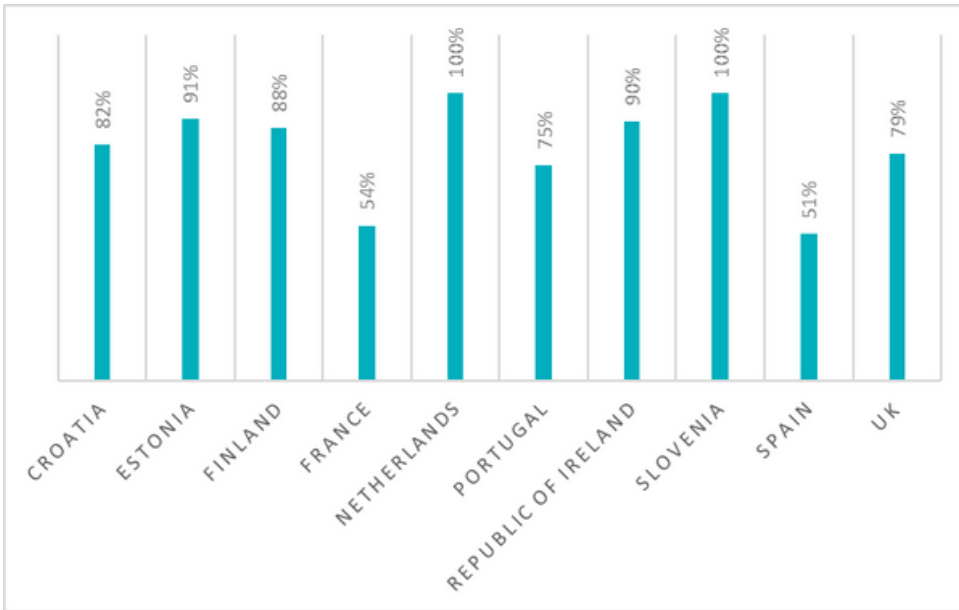
Percentage of institutions from partnership countries saying they have adult learners at EQF level 2

## What proportion of your adult learners are studying at EQF Level 3 and above?

Most institutions in the partnership countries have learners that are mainly learning at EQF Levels 3 and 4 although institutions in **France and Spain** report lower.



Percentage of institutions from partnership countries saying they have adult learners at EQF level 3

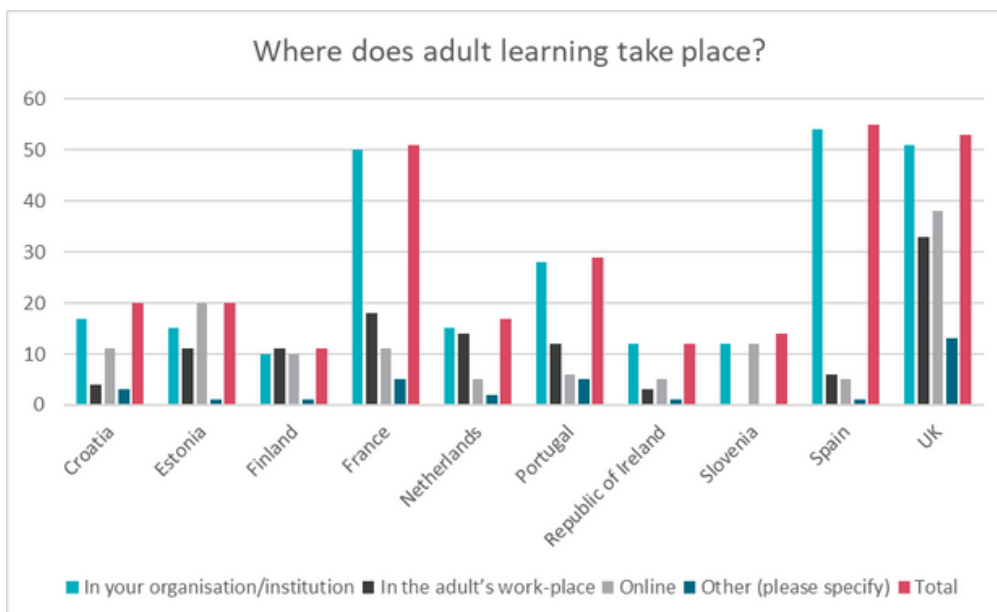


Percentage of institutions from partnership countries saying they have adult learners at EQF level 4

### Aside from during COVID restrictions, where does the VET you are delivering to adults take place?

Most adults learning in the partnership countries are studying or training within the responding institutions. **100% of Estonian** responding institutions said they offered online learning to all adults. They were followed by **Finland (91%), Slovenia (86%) and the UK (72%)**. At the other end of the scale, only **9% of Spanish institutions** said they offered online learning.

The countries with the highest percentage of education and training delivery to adults in the workplace were **Finland (100%), Netherlands (82%) and UK (62%)**. In contrast, no Slovenian institutions that responded, offered any adult learning in the workplace.



Where respondents had selected 'other' many said that they delivered training to adults via internships or work placements in companies. Many also provide adult education in local community settings, such as local libraries or community centres. Some of those responding in **Croatia** and **Portugal** did not deliver any vocational professional training. In Croatia, this is due to the structure of adult education providers and continuing vocational education. Some organisations work only with general adult education, some with vocational education, and some with both. A large number of NGOs also deliver informal adult education programmes that are not part of vocational education. These are formal programmes of basic education for adults and high schools conducted by public institutions. In this way, it demonstrates that adult education is not only CVET, but has a much wider scope that has come to the fore especially during the COVID pandemic in terms of digital skills, learning about prevention and healthy living.

There was a rise in hybrid delivery of adult learning where the learner may access learning in a college or vocational school or in the workplace with learning also accessible online.

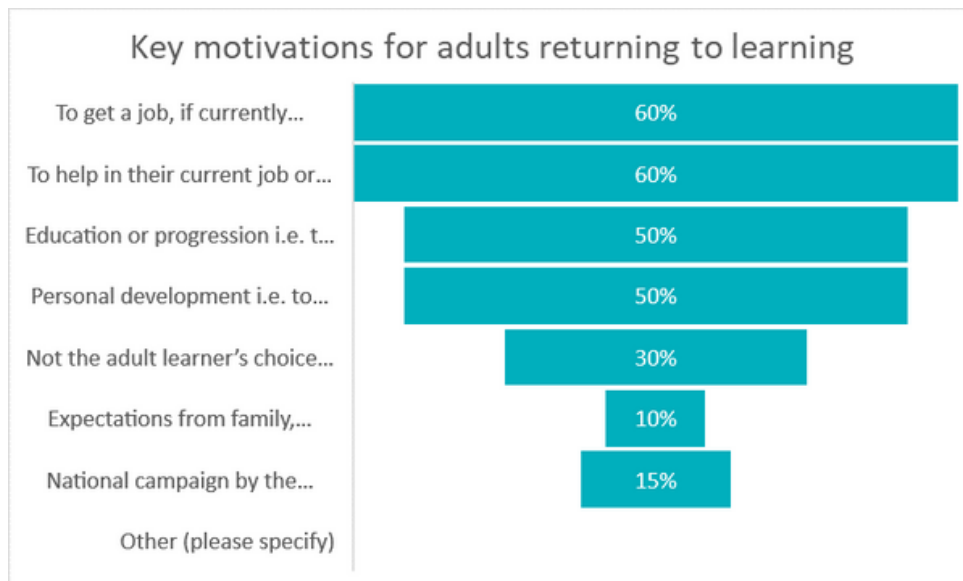
### **In your opinion, what are the THREE main reasons for adults to enrol in education programmes in your organisation:**

In most of the partnership countries, the majority of adults returned to education to get a job, to help in their current job or to get a better job, and for educational progression i.e., as a step towards the next level of learning. In the UK, many learners were returning to learn for personal development reasons i.e., to develop as a person, to improve self-confidence, to acquire basic learning skill, which is why it is important for governments to consider funding leisure courses as a stepping stone in building confidence in those returning to education and/or training after many years. The other outlier was Spanish institutions reporting that many adult learners return to education due to expectations from family, friends, or colleagues.

National campaigns have had some impact in a couple of the countries, with Croatia, Estonia, and the Netherlands in particular reporting that learners were inspired to return to learning.

Another reason not listed but given in the free text by a Portuguese respondent was that it was a condition of receiving welfare benefits for some adult learners.

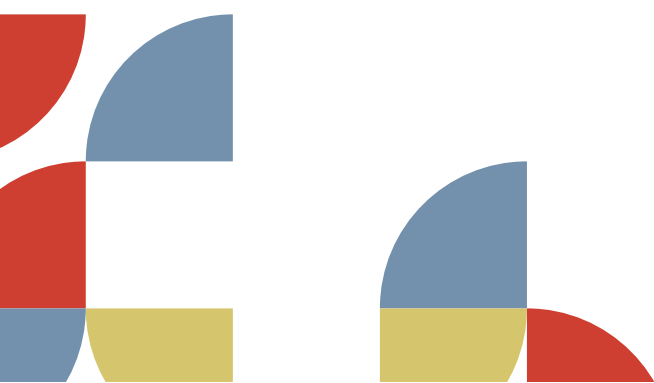




## **In your opinion, what are the main barriers, to coming back into education, that adult learners report:**

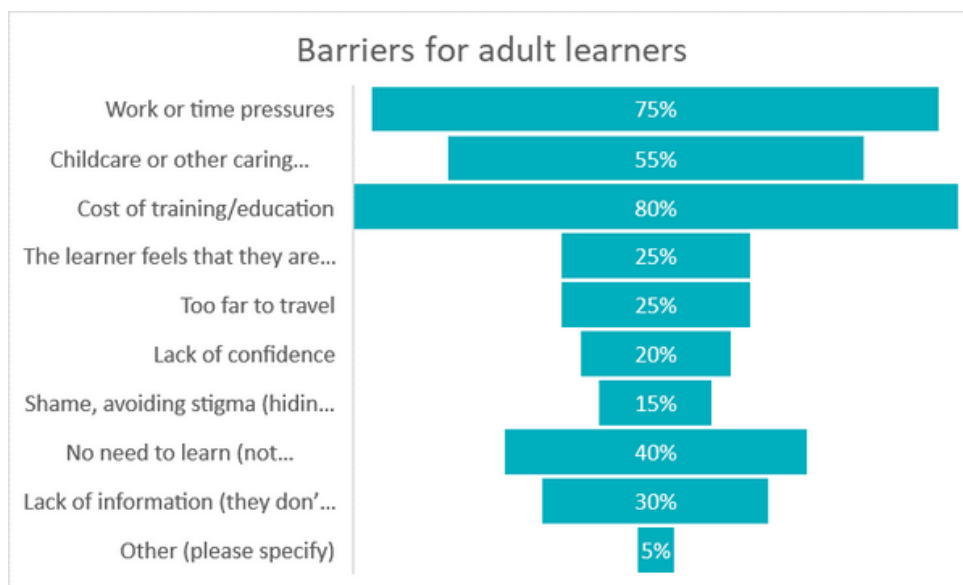
The main barriers for adults returning to education is a lack of information on educational possibilities. This indicates a need for better careers advice for adults. Understandably, work and/or time pressures and caring responsibilities also feature highly as barriers. It is important for programmes for adults to be flexible, accessible, and modular. Not all adults will have the time to access a full qualification – the commitment is too great. Options for micro-credentials will be key, allowing adults to access the learning they need to get them onto their next step – whether that be in a job or onto further learning. This will also support those with caring responsibilities.

The majority of childcare is still done by women, which puts them at a distinct disadvantage in terms of accessing further learning as an adult. Funding should be provided to pay for or subsidise childcare. Whilst some countries have affordable or subsidised childcare provision, some countries have prohibitively high childcare costs which place huge financial barriers in front of parents and carers.



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**In your opinion, what are the main barriers, to coming back into education, that adult learners report:**

Many respondents from across the partnership countries remarked on the positive aspects of everyone moving to deliver online learning. This helped some adult learners, due to geographical barriers, to access programmes they would not previously been able to. It also supported many adult learners to embrace technology and improve their digital literacy which, in turn, enabled many of them to feel less isolated during the pandemic as they could stay in touch with friends a family online. Teachers have also improved their digital literacy and capacity to delivery teaching and learning online.

There has been a shift in demand for more hybrid delivery models of adult education since the pandemic which, for some respondents, has increased enrolments. This helps adults, in particular, where they are juggling the competing demands of caring, work and study. What respondents were keen to point out, however, is that hybrid teaching and learning does not suit all programmes, for example, practical vocational classes cannot be delivered effectively online. Nor does it suit all adults (learning styles are very individual), for example, many adult learners see the opportunity for 'face-to-face' learning in a college/school setting as protected time away from distractions at home or work. Those adults studying at higher EQF levels tended to adapt to online learning better than those at lower levels. And in Portugal, one respondent reported that when face-to-face learning was stopped during pandemic lockdowns, the students just waited for face-to-face classes to resume and would not engage in online programmes.

Additionally, many reflected that adults had time to reflect on their current job roles and found time, during the pandemic, to access adult learning to enable them to change careers. One respondent in the Netherlands remarked on the demand for short professional courses that the pandemic precipitated. In the Basque Country, one respondent reported that both companies and organisations have realised the need for employee training, and this will have benefits for the future.

There were some respondents who felt that there were no positive outcomes, and that online learning was not the answer due to digital illiteracy amongst many adults. The 'digital divide' was reported by respondents in many of the partnership countries, where some of the most disadvantaged adult learners were negatively impacted with poor access to technology (both equipment and Wi-Fi). Some additionally felt that online learning restricted the social contacts that face-to-face learning brings.

In the Republic of Ireland and the UK, providers are continuing to experience challenges re-engaging with learners who disengaged throughout Covid. This could be from a lack of confidence or could be because their plans have changed. There has been the added impact of Covid on many people's mental health which may, as reported by some respondents in Slovenia and the UK, have had a negative knock-on effect on adult learner numbers. In the UK, financial circumstances and cost of living pressures were reported as significant barriers as the economy recovers after Covid. One UK college shared that their adult learning participation levels have dropped by 20%. The cost of living is now having a bigger impact than COVID as learners prioritise work over learning.

**During COVID, adult learning had to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and national and local restrictions. As we come out of the pandemic, are there any lasting changes that will remain? What are the positive lessons (if any) that we have learnt through delivering teaching and learning differently during this period of time? Has adult learning changed?**

Survey respondents in most of the countries participating remarked that digital and e-learning was here to stay but that it had not replaced face-to-face learning for adults. Most remarked on the fact that it has improved both learners and educators' digital skills and that has also promoted independent learning. However, some learners need more support than others and independent learning, for some, must be adequately supported by the provider otherwise there is a risk of disengagement from learning or that the student falls behind as they fail to keep pace with the rest of the group and lack the confidence to ask for help via online platforms. Face-to-face learning is, for a lot of adult learners, 'protected time' that they allocate in order to concentrate on their learning. It is also important for learners to see fellow students and their teachers 'in real life' and to form those connections and 'community' so that they feel confident and supported in their learning journey.

There also appears to be more sharing of digital teaching and learning resources and best practice between educators, which had a positive reaction.

Some respondents said that they would need better technology within their VET centres to support hybrid or online teaching and learning to a high standard. In Slovenia, for example, respondents reported that, whilst the government provided learners with equipment there was no funding made available to VET schools in order to improve or upgrade their technology. Whilst some of the countries had embraced how online learning could play a positive role in supplementing face-to-face learning, in others respondents were disappointed that there seemed to be an almost complete reversion to total face-to-face teaching and learning.

Some adult learners have challenges in finding an appropriate space to learn online in the home – especially where there are distractions, or they have children. We must also not forget that digital poverty and lack of access to reliable internet connectivity remains an issue for many adults across Europe and that many reported online learning working better for more motivated learners studying at higher levels.

Those studying lower level qualifications often struggled. This is a limiting factor of online learning. For some, though, it is clear that having some online elements to adult learning does provide flexibility of access, where previously adults have had challenges in attending all face-to-face classes. The possibilities of online learning have removed the geographical limitations of face-to-face learning. It also supports employees in companies that want to upskill or reskill their workforce. Additionally, some adult students like lesson recordings and have found this useful as a recap and for learning consolidation. A mix of face-to-face, supplemented with some independent online tasks appear to be favoured by many of those responding across all the partner countries.

The other point, picked up by some of those responding, is that it is almost impossible to deliver practical vocational and technical elements of adult learning online. These need to take place in a physical workshop setting.

Finally, many of those responding reflected on the fact that the education sector showed that it was able to respond swiftly to adverse situations so as not to impact negatively on their learners. Whether it be a pandemic or war situation, teaching and learning will continue.

**As a provider of adult education, what do you believe will be the key strategies and/or priorities for adult education in the next five years? Please provide up to five key points.**

A common theme across all the participating countries was that the profile of adult education and lifelong learning needed raising. There were suggestions of positive media campaigns and a feeling that adult education in the vocational/technical space was still not seen as a credible alternative to Higher Education.

Of significant importance to most countries was the need for investment in the teaching workforce and teaching methodology. One respondent in Slovenia suggested that teacher training placements should include a mandatory period of time in adult education departments. Ensuring funding meets adult education providers' costs is key with, for example, the UK (England specifically) reporting no increase in adult funding for at least the last 10 years. Countries such as Ireland and the UK reported a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention, especially in vocational/technical teaching posts where staff are being offered higher salaries to leave teaching and to go back and work in industry.



This has the potential to upend many governments drive for economic productivity and higher level skills if there are not enough vocational teaching staff to train the next generation of young people or to re-skill/upskill adult learners. This sits alongside a need for funding rules and eligibility criteria for adult education to be simplified for both the adult education provider and for the adult learner. On this last point, there is concern for some that funding complexity and the devolution of adult education budgets in some countries can discriminate against learners based on where they live. The example was given of a college in the UK being unable to train someone employed in one English county but who lives in another county due to the complexity and restrictions of the funding rules.

Many respondents felt that a move away from large qualifications towards smaller chunks of learning for adults, such as micro-credentials was essential to increase participation in adult education. Many cited the challenges of an ageing population and the need to look at reintegrating older people into the workforce which would require flexible and part-time employment options and a similar approach to the delivery of any required skills training for this group. Given the rapid rise of automation, AI and virtual reality technologies, consideration will need to be given to how work will change, and the other skills workers will need to adapt to this. A common theme from respondents was the need for employability skills and specific courses linked to upskilling and retraining such as green skills, health and social care, digital skills, and engineering.

Respondents also commented on the need for better recognition of prior learning for adults and many countries suggested that asylum seekers and refugees needed to be supported in order to integrate better into the workforce to close skills gaps.

Basic skills in literacy numeracy, digital skills and learning a host language as a second language are still a big concern and were especially cited as such in Estonia, Ireland, Portugal, and the UK. There will be limits to people progressing to higher skilled work if adult basic skills are not addressed and a clear pathway from entry level to higher level skills and into employment is not demonstrated. Many respondents also asserted that digital skills alone were insufficient. Many adults are proficient in the use of 'smart' phones but struggle to use computers in the workplace, where they may have to use certain programmes such as PowerPoint and Excel. As was mentioned previously, with many providers moving to a more hybrid model of adult education delivery, there is a need to address the digital divide that still exists in some communities. Unreliable internet access is still an issue in remote rural areas and many still don't have access to a computer or laptop that they can use at home for the purpose of learning. Learning on a smart phone is not a practical solution.

Ireland and the UK reported concern around the ongoing legacy of Covid and its impact on student mental health. The Netherlands and Ireland were concerned that any impact analysis of adult education focused on the economic value rather than the social value. It is remiss of governments if they do not consider both. On that point, respondents also cited the positive impact that learning can play in wellbeing, and this should be reflected in a more joined up approach and coherent strategies between education and health departments within governments. Adults should also have access to high quality information, advice, and guidance with regard to potential training courses or adult education.

The role of the other external stakeholders in shaping adult education curricula was a key theme that respondents in many countries highlighted. Some talked of the need for employers to be co-creators or co-designers of adult education vocational curricula, others just felt that better two-way relationships needed to be developed between education providers and industry. One respondent in Estonia suggested that tax incentives could be given to businesses who invest or sponsor vocational schools and colleges. Basque respondents talked about the need for training centres to have a central role in supporting local businesses with innovation, product development and research and to improve the entrepreneurship skills of all learners. There was also the suggestion that adult vocational and technical education providers need to collaborate more with universities. This is happening in many countries but could be more effective.

Finally, respondents in many of the partner countries made the point that learning other languages and access to internationalisation activities was essential for preparing learners for the future world of work.

Association of Colleges – 2023

