

# Monitoring learning outcomes of adult learning programmes

A review of European best practices on monitoring instruments

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This report presents European good practices regarding the monitoring of outcomes and impact of adult learning programmes for the low skilled. Several outcomes are examined, including educational performance, career development, social outcomes, and learners' satisfaction. In particular, the report explores the type of data collected, the stakeholders involved in data collection, and the methods and tools used.

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# 1 Introduction

Monitoring the outcomes of adult learning programmes is crucial to understand what type of programme works, and for which learners. Robust evidence on the impact of non-formal education may benefit all actors of the sector, from learners themselves to society at large. Indeed, learners may use publicly available information to identify the benefits of further education in general and to identify good quality providers. They may also exploit information on their individual performances to measure progress towards their own goals. Data on the various effects of adult education may help educators gauge the holistic nature of their impact. The collection of consistent data for the non-formal sector will also help providers show that non-formal programmes can be monitored and evaluated as carefully as formal trainings, and are as good and important. In some cases, training providers may use the data to make the case for their programmes' excellence and secure sustainable and diversified funding. They can also use the information to improve quality, rethink course curriculum, and enhance teaching methods. Finally, policy-makers and more broadly the society as a whole will benefit from better data, as it may not only increase knowledge and quality of the non-formal education sector, but will also help to respond to growing demands for public funds accountability.

Despite these clear advantages, monitoring the outcomes of non-formal learning also poses a number of challenges. On the one hand, the fragmentation and decentralization of the sector make data collection complicated. On the other hand, while adult education presents various benefits, affecting different spheres of learners' life, from labour market prospects to health, not all of these benefits are known or easy to measure quantitatively. There exists therefore a bias towards collecting only information on the easily identifiable benefits, which may provide only an incomplete picture. Furthermore, learning is a long-term activity whose outcomes will strongly depend on past and future actions and may materialize in the long-run only. This may hamper the ability to detect changes in the short term.

The type of outcome data to collect crucially depends on the goals against which performance should be assessed and how the information will be used. Yet, some general rules apply. For instance, one best practice is to use a broad set of indicators related to different areas of a learner's life. Clearly, the costs associated with data collection are important and will increase with the number of data indicators to include. Any decision to add an indicator should therefore carefully weigh the costs against the benefits. In some cases, complementary data sources, when they exist, may also help to save on the costs associated with data collection (Schumann, 2016<sub>[1]</sub>).

The next section uses recent data from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) to establish the relationship between participation in training and several outcome variables in the European Union in general and in the Netherlands in particular. The remainder of the report then presents different initiatives in several European countries to monitor learning outcomes and is structured around four different areas: educational outcomes, outcomes related to career development, other social and personal benefits, and learners' satisfaction. Each section presents the data indicators collected, the main actors involved in data collection, and the tools and methodologies used.

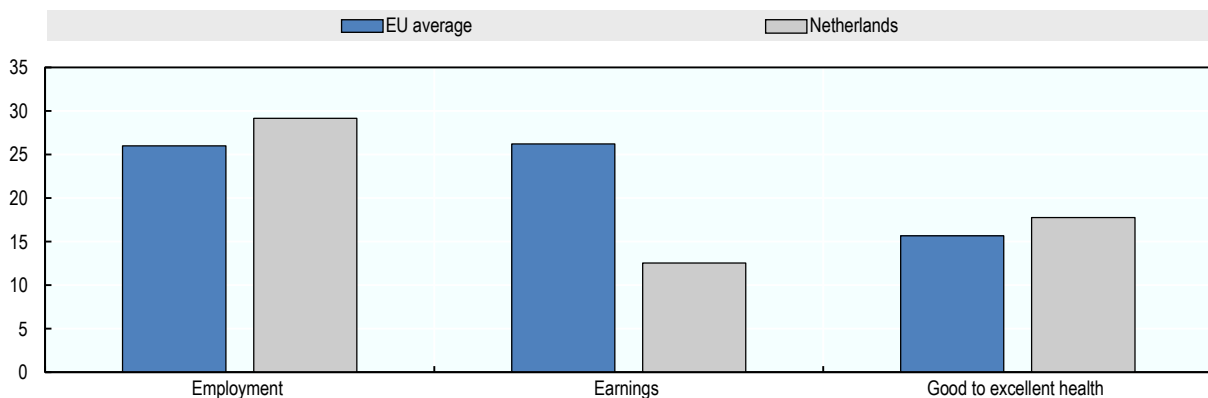
## 2 Setting the scene

Although at present the overall Dutch labour market is performing relatively well, several segments of the population are left behind. For instance, youth unemployment attained a high of 9% in 2017, compared to an overall unemployment rate of less than 5%. Similarly employment rates are particularly low for older workers at around 20% in 2017 (OECD, 2018<sup>[2]</sup>). In this context, participation in formal and non-formal training has the potential to play an equalising role for those individuals currently at a disadvantage. Indeed, across the European Union, adults that declare having participated in formal or non-formal learning over the past 12 months are around 25 percentage points more likely to be employed, and also earn on average 25% more (Figure 1). The difference in employment probability between the two groups is slightly higher in the Netherlands, while the difference in earnings is still positive but lower, at 13%.

Not only does participation in adult learning affect career development, it also impacts social inclusion, wellbeing, self-esteem, and health outcomes. For instance, Figure 1 also illustrates that participation in adult learning is linked to an increase in (self-reported) health compared to that of adults who did not take part in training.

**Figure 1. Participation in formal and informal training and economic and social outcomes**

Unadjusted difference between the percentage of adults that participated in formal or non-formal training and the percentage of adults that did not participate in training regarding their employment status, earnings, and health.



*Note:* This graph reports the unadjusted difference between the percentage of adults that participated in formal or non-formal training and the percentage of adults that did not participate in training who reported being employed (two first bars) and good to excellent health (two last bars). The two middle bars report the percentage difference in earnings between training participants and non-participants. EU average is computed using countries from the European Union that participated in the Survey of Adults Skills. It corresponds to the arithmetic mean of the respective estimates for each of the countries included. For the United Kingdom, only England is included and for Belgium only Flanders is included.

*Source:* Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015)

# 3 Educational outcomes

## What?

Several indicators may be used to monitor what participants learn in adult education programmes. First, most initiatives that record the number of participants also keep track of completion. For example, in Denmark, the database for Adult Education and Continuing Training that contains data for part-time adult education includes a variable indicating if the course has been completed and allows identifying dropouts. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, national achievement rate tables indicate the proportion of learners successfully completing a specific course of study. These rates are calculated at qualification or programme level, and can be aggregated across different types of course, and for particular providers (Department of Education, 2019<sup>[3]</sup>). Measures at provider level are used by the Department of Education for performance management, and national tables are published online.<sup>1</sup>

Dropouts or critical delays in completion might signal low-quality programmes or indicate limited learning. Indeed, while dropout may be the result of someone starting a new job or identifying a more suitable training option, a large proportion of dropouts in a given programme usually signals participants' dissatisfaction or demotivation and a low quality or inappropriate training. Furthermore, one may expect that the impact of learning is at best modest for individuals that do not attend a training until its end. However, one cannot infer what students learn from completion status. Therefore, dropout figures can be used to signal issues with a particular training, but completion rates are not enough to identify good quality programmes.

In the case of the United Kingdom, performance management funding rules require more than information on completion only. Training providers must possess learner files to support funding claims, and provide them to the Education and Skills Funding Agency when asked. Created for each participant, the file must contain, inter alia, the Individualized Learner Record (ILR). This record includes learner's personal characteristics (including basic demographics and the national insurance number), prior educational attainment, employment status, and details on the training, including progression regarding the different learning aims of the programme, and grades for each aim when relevant.

In addition to completion and dropout rates, another learning outcome that is often recorded is literacy and numeracy proficiency. Actually, the assessment of skills is part of two steps out of the three that constitute the Upskilling Pathways initiative developed by the European Council in 2016. The first step aims at enabling adults identify their existing skills. The second step is to offer individuals training programmes relevant to their needs, and the third step states that learners should have the opportunity to have the skills they have acquired validated and recognised.

A recent report on the Upskilling Pathways initiative (European Commission, 2019<sup>[4]</sup>) highlighted the case of Ireland regarding skills assessment. The Education and Training Boards (ETBs), responsible for Further Education and Training, provide initial and on-going skills assessment. A learner-centred, user-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/sfa-national-success-rates-tables> (accessed on 20 September 2019).

friendly toolkit<sup>2</sup> has been developed and can be used to formally assess skills up to EQF Level 2. While initial assessment is pretty harmonized, providers retain some to keep track of learners' progress. Indeed, tutors and learners themselves together decide which dimensions of learning count as progress and should be monitored. The assessment uses standardized procedures but relates to the everyday life of learners. For instance, for literacy, learners may be asked to assess how well they can "write birthday cards". Self-assessments are confirmed or corrected by the learner's performance on literacy or numeracy tasks.

Italy, Slovenia and Slovakia are considering the use of an online assessment tool linked to PIAAC, the OECD Education and Training Online<sup>3</sup>, to test skills of potential adult learners. For instance, in Italy, in a pilot project in December 2017, the public employment agency (ANPAL) has tested 3704 candidates using this tool (European Commission, 2019<sub>[4]</sub>).

When certificates are awarded at the end of a course, it is also possible to record information on participants' success in obtaining those. In contrast, in the non-formal sector, where individuals do not obtain diplomas, certificates or grades, teachers sometimes develop, together with the learners, *Individual Learning Plans* (ILP) in order to keep track of their progression. For example, in the United Kingdom, an analysis of the non-formal education sector conducted by an independent policy research organisation specialized in lifelong learning has revealed that several providers use this tool to encourage the reflection on the impact of learning. These learning plans are used not only to record learning, but also to build motivation and support the learning process. For instance, participants may be invited to indicate their achievements in the course, such as whether they improved their skills in the training topic or in a core skill (English, Maths, Computing, etc.), or whether they created a product or project. In some cases, the information collected through learning plans can be used to generate aggregated, quantifiable results. For example, some providers ask tutors to record in their management information system or in Excel files data collected on ILP paper forms. However, this practice is not widespread and several providers still lack consistent data regarding learning outcomes (Learning and Work Institute, 2016<sub>[5]</sub>).

## Who?

Training providers and teachers or tutors are in the best position to assess what participants have learned. This is particularly true for the informal assessment of learners' progression, as is done in the United Kingdom for Individualized Learner Records kept by providers receiving funding from the Skills Funding Agency and Individual Learning Plans used by several providers of non-formal education. In particular, regarding Individualized Learner Records, the providers are fully responsible for collecting the information and making the evidence easily available to the Skills Funding Agency when necessary. For Individual Learning Plans, tutors usually develop the learning plan in collaboration with the learner, and they are often responsible for digitalization.

However, when a formal assessment is necessary, for instance to award certificates or to measure learners' progress in literacy or numeracy, evaluations by external bodies may be preferred. For skills' assessments, collecting observations on a (representative) sample of participants may be sufficient, and will help minimize costs, especially if the aim is to understand the sector and its functioning, or to assess providers' performance. However, results to such surveys conducted on a smaller sample cannot be

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<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/Initial%20and%20Ongoing%20Assessment%20of%20Adult.pdf> (Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://www.oecd.org/skills/ESonline-assessment/abouteducationskillsonline/> (Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

used by learners for self-assessment. Usually, surveys on a limited number of participants are not carried out by providers but rather by market research organizations.

## How?

Some of the initiatives described above are harmonized at the national level, and hence all providers use the same system to assess learning outcomes. This is for instance the case of the Individualized Learner Records in the United Kingdom. The collection of these records is compulsory for providers that receive funding from the Education and Skills Funding Agency. For other initiatives (such as Individual Learning Plans), it is left to providers to decide whether and how to implement them. The main advantage of a harmonized scheme at national level is clearly the possibility of comparing outcomes without major measurement differences. However, this may come at the cost of a lower flexibility and adaptability to the diverse curriculums proposed by different providers.

In general, the transmission of data on educational outcomes is done using an online system. However, in most cases, there is a certain degree of flexibility as to the particular systems used. For instance, in Denmark, folk high schools and study associations send the data to the statistical office either using their own data management system or by uploading Excel files on a platform. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, most providers use their own data management system, but a data entry tool (the ILR Learner Entry Tool) is also available to training providers that do not have such data management infrastructure. The tool allows the creation of the records in XML format. It can be used to manage up to 500 participants each year. Data is stored on the user's machine and therefore the user is responsible for the data security.

Regarding skills assessment in particular, assessment procedures are numerous and generally rely on already existing tools when they exist. It is important to note that in order to measure a change in learners' skills, at least two assessments are needed: one realized at the beginning of (or before) the course, and one at the end or after completion.

# 4 Career development

## What?

A direct and clear goal of adult basic education is to foster individuals' economic inclusion. A number of studies highlight the positive association between participation in training and improved economic outcomes such as better employment prospects, participation in further training, wage increases, job satisfaction, and other benefits in working life (Midtsundstad, 2019<sup>[6]</sup>; OECD, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>).

Different approaches have been implemented to monitor labour market outcomes for participants in adult learning programmes. The most straightforward approach relies on surveys of learners at the time of training completion. For instance, in Ireland, a national system to schedule courses and manage learners - the PLSS (Program and Learner Support System) - allows for the consistent collection of data in relation to learners' participation and outcomes. At the time of completion, training providers need to record the completion status (full completer, partial completer, early finisher), a completion outcome if known by the training provider (full-time or part-time employment, self-employment, voluntary work, unemployment, inactivity, other training, etc.), and the certification achieved when relevant.

An important challenge of this first approach is that the employment status is unknown at the time of, or shortly after training completion, not only to training providers but in many cases also to the learners themselves. Indeed, they may be unemployed but in the process of still applying to a job or to a further training course. As a result, several training providers started to track the participants several weeks or months after completion, for instance by encouraging participants to update their status on their website, or by undertaking follow-up surveys. However, this resulted in the lack of consistency regarding the type and timing of data collection, and a great heterogeneity of data quality. Even within a training centre, there could be important variation in terms of information collected for learners attending courses with different teachers since the motivation of the latter to follow-up on their students' may vary largely (Cork Training Centre<sup>[8]</sup>).

To remedy this problem, SOLAS, the state organization responsible for funding, planning and coordinating further education and training in Ireland, has introduced a series of independent evaluations of its Further Education Training programmes to take place every two years. The follow-up survey of the 2016 training programmes has recently been completed. The goal was to have a better understanding at the national level of what happens to individuals after participation in a training programme, especially regarding labour market outcomes (job placement, relevance of employment to the subject of their training courses, engagement in further studying and up-skilling, etc.). One part of the survey was dedicated to participants' economic conditions after course completion. The questions concerned participants' employment status (whether they are employed, unemployed, student, inactive). For employed individuals, details on the job such as employment sector, Standard Occupational Classification, whether the position is full-time or part-time, permanent or temporary, length of time to find the position, and hourly rate of pay were collected. For unemployed individuals, questions related to the methods used to search for a job, the number of job interviews and job offers. The data also allowed the identification of individuals that receive welfare benefits.

Despite these clear improvements in respect to at-completion surveys, several challenges remain. For instance, response rates to follow-up surveys may be low, and tracking participants over time may prove particularly demanding. At the same time, the information collected remains self-reported by participants, thereby subject to response bias. Furthermore, in order to provide solid and useful information, the monitoring exercise needs to be repeated regularly, every year or every two years as in the Irish case (SOLAS, 2017<sup>[9]</sup>).

This is why several countries are currently experimenting with an alternative strategy: matching the information contained in participation data with other administrative datasets. In Ireland, for example, attempts to link PLSS surveys with data from the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection are underway in order to measure participation in further training and unemployment (Cork Training Centre<sup>[8]</sup>). Similarly, in Sweden the database collected in the context of municipal adult education has been linked with the longitudinal integrated database for health insurance and labour market studies (LISA) to obtain yearly information on employment status (according to register-based labour market statistics), income, and sector of employment.

## Who?

Training providers themselves typically collect information on the impact of their training on career development for their participants. However, risks of lack of coordination among providers arise. For example, in Ireland, several training providers started to track participants' outcomes in an uncoordinated manner, making it impossible to use the information to draw a clear picture of the impact of adult training on labour market outcomes.

Two solutions therefore exist. On the one hand, if survey questions are decided in advance for all training centres, this would reduce – although not completely eliminate – the issue of inconsistent data that arises when training centres collect participants' outcomes in an uncoordinated manner. On the other hand, the intervention of third-party bodies may be useful. This was indeed the case of Ireland. As mentioned above, to get consistent nation-wide information, SOLAS sub-contracted a survey involving participants who left training in the period January to March 2016 to a market research company. Results have been published on the SOLAS website.<sup>4</sup> This strategy of sub-contracting the follow-up survey to an external entity is also implemented in France. Indeed, the Statistical Unit of the Ministry of Employment (*DARES*) coordinates research on work, employment and vocational training. To fulfil its missions, it has funds to issue call for proposals and commission projects to external research organizations.

## How?

In Ireland, the nation-wide survey was conducted through phone interviews, but individuals with disabilities could also undertake the survey by email via an online link, or face to face with a trained interviewer. SOLAS transmitted to its independent contractor the database containing contact details for all individuals that completed a FET programme between January and March 2016. Based on this information, and to ensure representativeness of the survey, the company computed the number of individuals to survey by course, gender, age, location and length of time unemployed. Interviews took place between the 16th May and 27th of June 2017 and in total 2 047 participants were contacted and accepted to respond to the survey. The survey contained not only questions on current economic status as detailed above, but also questions related to the programme details, demographics and background information on participants, economic status prior to training, and participants' perceptions about course contribution to job, and course feedback. It lasted approximately ten minutes. Data collection and

<sup>4</sup> [www.solas.ie](http://www.solas.ie) (accessed 19 September 2019).



analysis were undertaken to comply with data protection regulations in effect in Ireland. In particular, informed consent was obtained from all individuals regarding the processing of their personal information (SOLAS, 2017<sub>[9]</sub>).

As mentioned above, in Sweden, the burden of organizing surveys to track learning outcomes is avoided by matching the data on participants in adult education with the database for health insurance and labour market studies thanks to the collection of participants' personal identity number (*personnummer*) at the time of their registration in municipal education. Similar strategies to obtain information on economic outcomes of training participants are in place in the United Kingdom and Denmark.

This approach presents several advantages. First, it helps save on the cost of organizing a follow-up survey to track outcomes. Relying on already existing administrative data may also help get details on participants at the beginning of training thus avoiding costs of data collection at the time of registration. It also allows the tracking of outcomes at different points in time, and therefore allows the analysis of short, medium, and long-term effects of participation in training. Furthermore, administrative information is in many instances more reliable than self-reported information. This is especially the case for sensitive data, such as income and earnings. Finally, this approach also minimises problems of under-coverage or sample selection, as almost all participants can be retrieved in administrative databases. However, this strategy hinges on the existence of linkable administrative databases. Furthermore, it necessitates the collection of a national identification number, and thus comes at the cost of an increased concern for data protection. Asking for this personal information may also constitute an important barrier to participation for participants who value anonymity when visiting learning centres.

### Box 1. Going beyond programme monitoring: using impact evaluation to understand what works

Monitoring and evaluation are two related yet different concepts. Monitoring – the focus of this report - is a continuous process to check progress of a project or programme, without making judgement. Instead, evaluation gauges the achieved results against expected ones. Reliable monitoring is thus a pre-requisite for sound evaluation. Among the different types of evaluation that exist, impact evaluation is regarded as the most rigorous method to measure programme effectiveness. The aim of impact evaluation is to determine whether participation in a given programme is the cause of observed changes in an individual's outcomes, for instance in the labour market. Comparing situations before and after programme participation is not enough, as other factors affecting the labour market are likely to also change during the training period. Similarly, in general comparing training participants and non-participants is not meaningful as these two groups differ along several dimensions in addition to programme participation (such as educational attainment, ability, or motivation to learn). Conducting impact evaluation therefore requires the use of more sophisticated strategies to isolate the causal impact of a given programme. Since seminal paper by Ashenfelter (1978<sub>[15]</sub>), academic research concerned with the causal impact of job training programmes has been flourishing (see for instance Biewen et al., 2014<sub>[16]</sub>; Card et al., 2011<sub>[17]</sub>; Krueger and Rouse, 1998<sub>[18]</sub>; Lechner and Wunsch, 2009<sub>[19]</sub>). A small number of countries also use impact evaluation to guide policy-making. For instance, several labour market reforms in Germany known as the Hartz reforms have been carefully evaluated (OECD, 2019<sub>[16]</sub>). Clearly, the assessment of policy reforms through impact evaluation methods should be undertaken by highly trained researchers and academics, and hence cannot be easily incorporated in a national monitoring system for adult education.

# 5 Social outcomes

## What?

Participation in adult training has wider benefits than educational and economic outcomes. Research has demonstrated a positive association between participation in adult learning and changes in health behaviours (related to smoking, drinking alcohol, and exercising), well-being, mental health, social and political attitudes (race tolerance, political cynicism, authoritarianism, political interest), and civic participation (civic membership, participation to elections) (Chevalier and Feinstein, 2007<sup>[10]</sup>; Feinstein and Hammond, 2004<sup>[11]</sup>). However, given the complexity of following up with participants and engaging them in surveys outside the direct scope of learning and labour market performance, only a few countries regularly gather data on social outcomes. A notable exception is Norway, where, alongside economic dimensions, the personal and social benefits of the Skills Plus programme are carefully monitored. More specifically, participants' self-confidence, self-esteem, communication competencies, cooperation, and job satisfaction are evaluated.

In the past few years, other countries have attempted to put in place initiatives collecting information on social and civic outcomes. For instance, starting in 2016/17 the United Kingdom implemented a pilot project in ten learning centres providing non-accredited adult learning to test the possibility to measure and record learners' social outcomes. Training providers could choose to collect learners' outcomes related to different themes: health and wellbeing, confidence and progression, social relationships, family relationships, financial capability, social capital. Questions for each theme were drawn from already existing metrics developed in the psychology literature (Stevens et al., 2019<sup>[12]</sup>).

Given the scarcity of countries' good practices regarding the collection of this type of outcomes, insights could also be drawn from questions asked in general population surveys. For instance, Box presents several questions included in the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) to measure trust in others, (external) political efficacy, volunteering, and health. More precise questions about social and political values and attitudes can also be found in the World Value Survey or the European Social Survey. A study by Feinstein and Hammond (2004<sup>[11]</sup>) relies on data from the 1958 National Child Development Study<sup>5</sup>, that includes a number of questions around health behaviour, well-being, social participation and attitudes in addition to physical and educational development variables, economic circumstances, and family life.

### Box 2. Social outcomes collected in the Survey of Adult Skills

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) collects self-reported information on four non-economic

<sup>5</sup> The 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) is following the lives of an initial 17,415 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1958. It started in 1958 at birth, as the Perinatal Mortality Survey.

outcomes: the level of trust in others; participation in associative, religious, political, or charity activities (volunteering); the sense of being able to influence the political process (political efficacy); and health conditions. The exact questions for each dimension are the following:

**Trust in others:** “Do you agree that only few people can be trusted?” Possible answers are: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree. Individuals who disagree or strongly disagree with this statement are usually considered as having high levels of trust. A related question asks respondents whether they agree that other people will take advantage of them if they are not careful.

**External political efficacy:** “Do you agree that people like you don’t have any say about what the government does?” This question can be also thought of as a measure of trust in institutions.

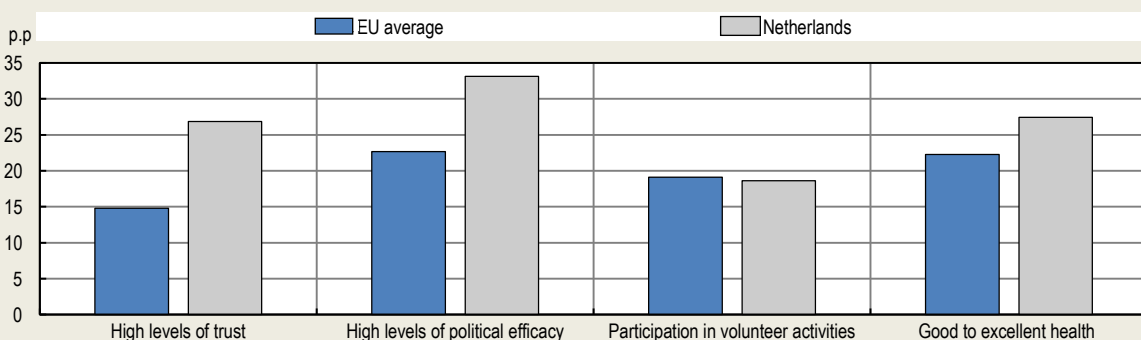
**Civic participation:** “In the last 12 months, how often, if at all, did you do voluntary work, including unpaid work for a charity, political party, trade union or other non-profit organisation?” Possible responses are the following: Never, Less than once a month, Less than once a week but at least once a month, At least once a week but not every day, Every day.

**Health:** “In general, would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?” For this question, health is understood as physical and mental health.

Good performance along these four measures is positively associated with high level of literacy proficiency, both in the Netherlands and on average in the European Union (Figure 2). It is clear that, although useful to benchmark a country’s performance, such type of information do not provide detailed disaggregated information at local level. To understand how effective the training programmes are for different groups of learners, it can be envisaged instead to ask similar questions to training participants before and after the course to observe changes in attitudes.

**Figure 2. Literacy proficiency and positive social outcomes**

Unadjusted difference between the percentage of adults with high proficiency and the percentage of adults with low proficiency who reported high levels of trust and political efficacy, good to excellent health, or participating in volunteer activities.



*Note:* This graph reports the unadjusted difference between the percentage of adults with high literacy proficiency (Levels 4 and 5 ) and the percentage of adults with low literacy proficiency (Level 1 or below) who reported high levels of trust and political efficacy, good to excellent health, or participating in volunteer activities. EU average is computed using countries from the European Union that participated in the Survey of Adults Skills. It corresponds to the arithmetic mean of the respective estimates for each of the countries. For the United Kingdom, only England is included and for Belgium only Flanders is included.

*Source:* Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012, 2015)

Source: (OECD, 2016<sup>[13]</sup>)

## Who?

As there are only few examples of European countries that collect this type of social outcome data, it is hard to generalise on which agency or body is typically in charge of this monitoring. For instance, in Norway the agency in charge of studying the benefits of the Skills Plus programme is *Kompetanse Norway*, which is the Directorate for Lifelong Learning of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. In the United Kingdom, instead, it is an independent policy and research organisation dedicated to promoting lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion – the Learning and Work Institute – that started to work on the measurement of social outcomes of learning in 2016.

## How?

Methodologies to collect information on the impact of adult training on social outcomes are varied. In Norway, for example, the evaluation of personal and social impacts of adult training is done using survey data. Participants answer a questionnaire at the end of the first day of the course, on the last day of the course and one year after the completion of the course. This allows *Kompetanse Norway* to detect both short-term and longer-term effects of the training in terms of changes in self-reported well-being and social inclusion.

In contrast, in the United Kingdom, the providers that took part at the pilot chose to collect data on social outcomes in different ways. Some included the questions in other documents completed by learners, such as registration and completion forms. Others kept the process separate from already existing procedures. Questions were asked during the training, so that teachers could introduce the questions to individuals. Participants answered the questions anonymously but some support to understand the questions was also provided for those who needed it.

Several key lessons were drawn from the UK pilot experiment. Overall, the providers were positive about the experience, and this confirmed the possibility and interest to measure the wider benefits of adult education. The organisation of meetings with teachers to show them how to use the tools and to get their feedback proved instrumental to gain their adherence. In the future, the use of online tools instead of paper forms filled by participants could help avoid the costs related to data transcription but may be difficult to implement when learners possess low levels of digital skills. Furthermore, the wording of questions needs to be adapted to the literacy level of learners. Some providers even expressed concerns that several questions on social capital, mental health and well-being touched upon sensitive issues that should not be discussed in learning centres.

One recommendation from Stevens et al. (2019<sup>[12]</sup>) is that the Department of Education should consider the development of a national framework to support the collection of social outcomes by training providers. This begs the question of whether an harmonized system, where all providers need to ask the same set of questions to participants, should be developed, or whether a system where a portfolio of indicators is proposed to training centres and where the latter are free to choose the questions to ask to participants, is more desirable. This question is actually not specific to the monitoring of social outcomes but should also be discussed in the context of the monitoring of other outcomes (satisfaction, educational outcomes, and career development). The main advantage of the first option is that data will be comparable across centres while the strengths of the second solution is that it can be tailored to the local context and thus more accepted by learners or even training providers themselves.

# 6 Satisfaction

## What?

Learning outcomes can be inferred also using answers from satisfaction surveys – a tool frequently included in many quality assurance systems. In fact, this type of survey typically collects a plethora of relevant information on the subjective usefulness of the training, not only in terms of skills acquired, but also in terms of training's utility in the working and personal life. As participants are the main beneficiaries of learning programmes, collecting their opinion is important to get a sense of the training's impact, especially since satisfaction may also affect the learning process. It is also crucial to show participants that they are heard and their opinions matter. Furthermore, if learners are offered a space to provide comments on the training's impact, this may help identify unintended consequences of adult learning programmes. Yet, while important to get participants' feedback on the training experience, satisfaction surveys are less useful to measure with precision what individuals have learned and how this could affect their lives. Overall, satisfaction surveys constitute a valuable – however not sufficient – source of information.

For instance, in the Brussels capital region (Belgium), *Bruxelles Formation*, the public service in charge of vocational training for the French-speaking population in Brussels, sends satisfaction surveys to training participants. The survey includes around 40 questions on the participant's general satisfaction, on the waiting period before a training, guidance received, volume of paperwork to access and during training, course content and quality, teaching methods and tools, training hours and length, and on the training centre, the premises, its location, and possible difficulties encountered by participants. The survey takes approximately ten minutes to fill on average (OECD, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>).

In the United Kingdom, several performance measures on the provision of adult education are collected, including educational and social outcomes as detailed in the previous sections, but also measures of learner satisfaction. The Further Education (FE) Choices Learner Satisfaction Survey gathers opinions of learners or apprentices aged 16-18 and 19+ on teaching, staff, guidance, as well as general satisfaction and willingness to recommend the training to relatives and peers. The survey also contains several personal characteristics of the participants (such as age, level of study and gender) that allow analysis of satisfaction levels by demographic group.

In Slovenia, in the context of the Offering Quality Education to Adults (OQEA) initiative, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education has developed a systematic collection of quality indicators that training providers can browse and select to use in self-evaluations. Questions asked to participants may concern their satisfaction with the premises where the education or supporting activities take place, the learning support and other types of support in place, the teachers, expert, and administrative-technical staff, the knowledge they received in education and the usefulness of training. In addition, providers may also choose indicators regarding other dimensions such as the general and vocational competences developed by participants, their participation in further education, their employment prospects, and social inclusion.

In Denmark, providers of adult education are encouraged to use a self-evaluation tool (*VisKvalitet*) to measure participants' satisfaction and learning outcomes. While the use of this tool is only compulsory

for continuing vocational education and training providers, it remains available to other training providers on a voluntary basis. Training participants are asked whether they are satisfied about the clarity of the learning objectives, the planning of the course, the quality of the teacher, the duration of the course, etc. In addition, the tool also includes questions about perceived impact of the training, such as willingness to engage in further training, prospects on the labour market, and usefulness of the course for the current job for employed individuals. Training providers may also add questions in addition to the mandatory ones. The tool also collects information on the satisfaction of employers whose employees have participated in training programmes. For them, the survey contains background questions (about where they got information on the course, reason for the employee attending the course, duration between enrolment and start of the course) and satisfaction questions (satisfaction with waiting time before start of the course, alignment with business needs, usefulness of course for employee's work) (OECD, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>).

## Who?

Learners are at the heart of satisfaction surveys. As these surveys are conducted at or after completion, one important caveat is that it is usually not possible to gather information from early leavers. For instance, in Brussels, the questionnaire becomes available online at the end of the training for all participants who completed the course. Information on how to fill in the survey is given to the participant together with other documents related to the end of the training.

In most cases, the questions are harmonized across training centres, even when a number of providers with different governance structures and business models deliver the education. In the United Kingdom, institutions that take part in the FE Choices Learner Satisfaction Survey include general further colleges, specialist colleges (including art and design and land based), special designated institutions, higher education institutions, and other public-funded institutions, including from the private sector. In contrast, in Slovenia, the collection of indicators has been created by the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education but each training provider is free to choose the area in which it wants to collect data and the particular indicators to use. Providers also remain responsible for data collection, interpretation, and use of the results to improve quality of education.

In addition to learners and training centres, a number of other stakeholder are usually involved in the data collection process. In Denmark, all participants in a labour market education (the most important vocational training program for individuals with low levels of education), as well as their employer for employed individuals, are asked to rate their training with this system. The results are used by the different stakeholders involved in labour market education (training participants, companies, teachers, educational institutions, continuing education committees that develop the labour market programs and the Ministry of Education) to feed the dialogue on this type of education.

The Ministry of Education is in charge of the substantive development and the financing of the system, and ensures that educational institutions and continuing education committees use results to improve quality of education. It is also responsible for liaising with the continuing education committees, educational institutions, and the *WEU* Council (Council for Adult and Continuing Education), around the rules and development of the system. The Council for Adult Education and Training (*WEU* Council) is the supreme advisory body for the Ministry of Education on the content of labour market education. It also represents the interests of employers' organizations and trade unions. As the common tool for quality assurance is used to improve labour market education, the *WEU* Council plays an important role in qualifying the choice of indicators and their use. It is continuously involved in and informed about the development of the system. In practice, the development of the system takes place in an ongoing collaboration between the Ministry and the Danish Agency for IT and Learning (*STIL*). *STIL* is in the organization in charge of the technical development and operation of *Viskvalitet*, and it provides IT support to training centres when necessary.

## How?

The collection of information on learners' satisfaction in adult education programmes is typically undertaken through online surveys. The case of Denmark is particularly illustrative in this sense. In the past, different training providers were implementing both oral and small written examinations to assess participants' satisfaction. However, because initiatives were not harmonized, the information could not be used to build a comprehensive monitoring system, common to all labour market programmes. As a consequence, in 1999 the National Board of Labour, in charge of labour market programmes at that time, put together a working group consisting of representatives from the training centres, continuing education committees, the Danish Labour Market Authority and later also representatives from the teachers' organizations to develop a common tool to evaluate the labour market education. Nowadays, individuals can access a harmonized nation-wide survey on participants' satisfaction directly online on the *ViskValitet* website<sup>6</sup> through a personal access key. Results of the satisfaction surveys are also published online, in an attempt to increase transparency and quality of labour market education. Authorities nevertheless recognize that results of satisfaction measurements should always be viewed in their context, as many outside factors may also influence assessments, and results from *ViskValitet* should be supplemented with other evidence collected through in-depth exchanges between teacher and participants, and between educational institution and companies. The use of follow-up discussions with participants and companies after completion is particularly recommended in order to understand whether training can be used in the workplace, or whether individual's goals have been achieved. Finally, the tool also collects teachers' feedback.

The possibility to access the questionnaires directly from the training centres seems particularly important to ensure high response rates. For instance, during the pilot phase of *Bruxelles Formation's* satisfaction survey in Belgium in 2014, participants were initially requested to fill the questionnaire online, outside the training centres. This translated in a remarkably low response rate. Consequently, nowadays participants can access the questionnaire online directly from the training centre, a possibility that has proved instrumental to increase the number of respondents.

In certain cases, adult education programmes also leave the possibility to fill in paper questionnaires, rather than computer-based surveys, in an attempt to remove obstacles for those participants with low IT competencies. Yet, as shown by the case of the United Kingdom, paper-based forms remain largely unexploited. Indeed, in 2016/17 both a paper and online version of the FE Choices Learner Satisfaction Survey have been made available to participants. However, the vast majority submitted an online response, with only 6% using paper-based forms.

Finally, few countries let providers directly choose their preferred type of assessment. For example, in Slovenia an online platform (*Mozaik Kakovosti*) presents all the tools that training providers can exploit to develop a self-evaluation framework, including those measures to gather information on participants' satisfaction. From this online catalogue, training providers can decide which information they want to collect, and how.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.viskvalitet.dk>

### Box 3. Using qualitative information to complement quantitative data

Qualitative and quantitative data present different strengths and weaknesses. When properly used, these two types of information have the potential to complement each other. The focus of this report is the production of quantitative data but the value of qualitative information is also acknowledged and this box presents in more details various methods to collect such data.

One interesting – albeit uncommon – way of assessing providers' performance regarding learners' achievements in a training programme has been developed in Finland: a questionnaire is sent to all 165 Vocational Education and Training providers, asking how unusual student “archetypes” perform in the course, whether they are expected to reach their goals, and what type of support is provided to them. The learners' archetypes refer to individuals typically excluded from the labour market and training programs, such as a young individual unemployed for 18 months with low education level and learning difficulties, or an older worker with low foundational skills and not eager to return to school. The aim is to understand how the different providers deal with individuals from vulnerable groups, collect and publish good practices and guidelines, and identify gaps to improve the system as a whole.

Another example of the use of qualitative data is the case of a study conducted in 2018 by *Bruxelles Formation* to analyse the relationship between participation in on-the-job-training and career development. The qualitative part of the study aimed at understanding individuals' experiences during the training and to put into perspective the quantitative results. Qualitative data were collected from individual semi-structured interviews or focus groups with the main actors of the training (learners, individuals responsible for corporate relations in the training centre, and enterprises).

Qualitative data is particularly useful to understand wider benefits of adult education. Indeed, quantitative data collection methods usually focus on conventional indicators of training outcomes, such as educational achievements or career development. To investigate broader and unexpected impacts of course participation, one needs to trigger in-depth self-reflection by learners and other actors. For instance, the Benefits of Lifelong Learning (BeLL) study, carried out throughout Europe between 2011 and 2014, investigated the benefits to learners of participation in organised non-formal, non-vocational, voluntary adult education using a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire and qualitative information was obtained thanks to open questions included in the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with adult learners. In total, 8 646 valid questionnaires and 82 interviews were completed in ten countries (Manninen et al., 2014<sub>[14]</sub>).



# 7 Conclusion

The present report discussed various initiatives aimed at developing a system to monitor the outcomes of adult learning programmes for the low skilled implemented in different European countries. In particular, the report reviews indicators to monitor educational performance, career development, social outcomes and participants' satisfaction. As it comes out from the study, for each area under scrutiny, numerous indicators exist, all of them are relevant to monitor the impact of training on different dimensions of a participant's life but present various strengths and weaknesses. For instance, relying on participants' opinions on the training may expand our understanding of the impact of adult education; however, such self-reported measures present several validity problems. Career development outcomes are easier to verify, but give a narrow picture of the impact of training. Overall, no monitoring instrument is ideal for examining each and every aspect of adult learning, and a mix of instruments is therefore envisaged.

Yet, it is important to remember that not everything we would like to measure can actually be measured. In fact, only adopting multiple indicators as well as various assessment methods can provide a clear and exhaustive picture of the impact of learning programmes on adults' outcomes. Moreover, the use of qualitative insights (for example, from interviews) can be equally important to guide understanding of results, especially regarding the wider benefits of adult education.

The tools and methodologies implemented for each of these indicators differ greatly, and are typically tailored both to the type of data collected and to the local context. This leads to the fundamental problem of harmonization. To make monitoring results comparable across providers, regions, and time, some degree of adaptability may be abandoned as a harmonized and common monitoring framework should be put in place at macro (national, regional, or sectoral) level. A large effort is thus needed to coordinate the process, and make sure each actor involved can play a role.

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