

Increasing adult learning participation

Learning from successful reforms

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Key findings



There is **no magic bullet for increasing adults' learning participation**; approaches vary greatly across countries.



Comprehensive approaches covering different target groups and addressing multiple challenges faced by adults are used to increase the overall participation rate.



Stakeholder involvement is crucial in both the development and implementation of successful adult learning reforms.



Increasing adult learning participation **does not have to come with a high price tag**. The direct costs of successful measures ranged from 200 to 2 500 euros per participant.



Adapting policies and programmes based on lessons from implementation is common in successful reforms.



High participation is not sufficient for a well-functioning and future-ready adult learning system. Reforms must also focus on **training quality** and **alignment** with labour market needs, as well as achieving positive **labour market outcomes for participants**.

Increasing adult learning participation is a key priority, but policies often stumble during implementation

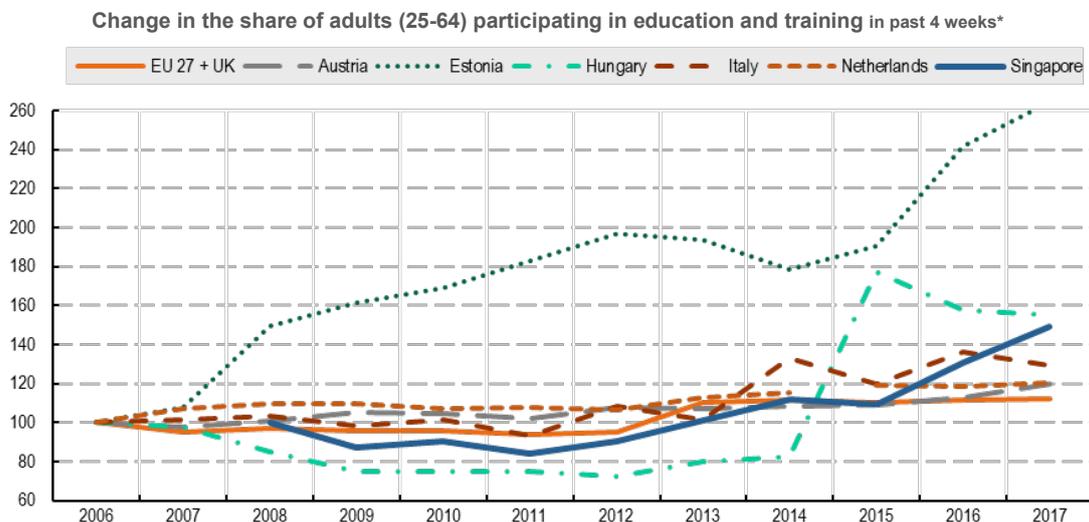
Policy-makers have long recognised that participation in **adult learning is key** to unlock benefits of a changing world of work. Changes in skill demand brought about by megatrends such as technological change, globalisation and population ageing have put adult learning at the top of policy makers' agendas. At present, only two-in-five adults across the EU and OECD participate in education and training in any given year, according to the OECD Survey

of Adults Skills (PIAAC) and even fewer among low-skilled and older adults. While much has been written about the need for progress in this area, it is less clear how adult learning participation can be increased in practice. Many good ideas struggle to translate into real change on the ground, as they get stuck in the difficulties of policy implementation.

Drawing on the experience of six countries that have significantly increased participation over the past decades (see Chart 1), the OECD has looked at the factors behind successful policies and programmes ([Increasing adult](#)



Chart 1. Trends in adult learning participation in selected countries



Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey; Supplementary Survey on Adult Training, Manpower Research & Statistics Department, MOM, Singapore.
 Note: *Data for Singapore refers to citizens and permanent residents aged 15-64 participating in job-related activities over a 12-month period.

[learning participation – Learning from successful reforms](#)). The six countries – Austria, Estonia, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands and Singapore – have experienced some of the strongest increases in adult learning participation in the past 15 years. Based on analysis of 17 reforms deemed to be the most important for the observed increases in participation, the OECD has identified **five key lessons** on the design, implementation and evaluation of adult learning reforms.

There is no magic bullet for increasing adults' participation in education or training

Selected reforms cover a wide variety of measures with **diverse aims and objectives**. They provide different types of training, address multiple barriers to participation and engage various target groups (see Table 1). The majority of the reforms are aimed at individuals by expanding their training options, or by improving incentives to participate in existing training programmes. Far fewer reforms are aimed at increasing training provision by employers. Most countries introduced both universal measures for the entire adult population and targeted ones, typically focusing on the low-skilled, unemployed or older individuals.

The number of participants reached by the policies under review varies widely from less than 2 000 in the early years of the Austrian *Paid Educational Leave* reform, to more than one million per year in the case of the Italian *Training Funds*. When comparing this to the adult population in the respective countries coverage varies from less than 1% of the adult population in most cases to more than 15% (Italian *Training Funds*). Hence, it is unlikely that any one reform was solely responsible for the observed country-level increases. This stresses the **need for comprehensive approaches** when tackling adult learning participation, because it may be the combination of reforms, rather than each reform in isolation, that contributes to the increase in country-level participation rates.

Stakeholder involvement is crucial in both the development and implementation of adult learning reforms.

While the impetus for reform often comes from the central administration, the **involvement of a range of stakeholders** in the development and/or the implementation of reform turns out to be essential. The lack of involvement of all relevant stakeholders hinders the effective implementation of policies.



Table 1. Overview of reforms included in the review

Country	Reform	Short description
AUT	Expansion of ALMPs	Increase in funding and scope of training-related Active Labour Market Policies
	Initiative for Adult Education	New programme to provide free basic and second-chance education for adults
	Paid Educational Leave	Multi-stage reform of wage replacement benefit paid to individuals during training absences
EST	Expansion of ALMPs	Increase in funding and scope of training-related Active Labour Market Policies
	Lifelong-Learning Strategy	Comprehensive package of policy reforms, including in the area of adult learning
	State-Commissioned Short courses	New programme of free-of-charge short vocational courses
HUN	Free Second Vocational Degree	Law change that made the acquisition of a second vocational degree free of charge
	Basic Skill Courses	New programme offering free-of-charge basic skills training for public workers
	Open Learning Centres	Establishment of 50 learning centres offering free-of-charge short courses for low-skilled adults
ITA	Adult Education Centres	Reform of adult education centres, introducing greater autonomy and more tailored programmes
	Training Funds	Introduction of training levy paid by employers and used for in-company training
NLD	Network Training	New mandatory job-search training for older unemployed adults (50+)
	Training Vouchers	Introduction of training vouchers for older unemployed adults (50+)
	Sector Plans	New sector wide programmes to improve sectoral/regional labour markets
SGP	SkillsFuture Credit	Introduction of training vouchers for Singaporeans aged 25 and above
	SkillsFuture Mid-Career Enhanced Subsidy	Introduction of 90% training subsidy for Singaporeans aged 40+
	SkillsFuture Series	New training programmes to address emerging skill needs

Source: OECD (2020) Increasing adult learning participation: Learning from successful reforms.

The vast majority of successful reforms analysed are governed through a network approach, most often in the form of advisory or supervisory bodies that are composed of different key stakeholders. These most frequently include **social partners and public employment services**. Individual employers, learning providers and regional ministries are less frequently involved in the reforms under review. A coordinated approach requires reflection on the mechanisms applied to ensure the effectiveness of the decision-making process.

Increasing adults' participation in learning does not have to come with a high price tag

The direct **costs** of the examined programmes ranged from 200 to 2 500 euros per participant (Chart 2). The most expensive programmes are those that also cover the indirect costs of training: the Austrian *paid educational leave* cost around 3 500 to 12 000 euros per person and year as it also compensated individuals for foregone wages.

Tax funding through social security contributions and levies is the most common way of paying for adult learning reforms often with co-funding by the European Union through the **European Structural Funds (ESF)**. For some countries, the availability of ESF funding was instrumental in implementing reforms. However, while ESF funding facilitates the implementation of more wide-reaching reforms, it poses a risk for their sustainability

beyond the ESF funding cycle. Estonia has established good practice by using ESF to trial new measures and then using tax or social security based funding when proven successful.

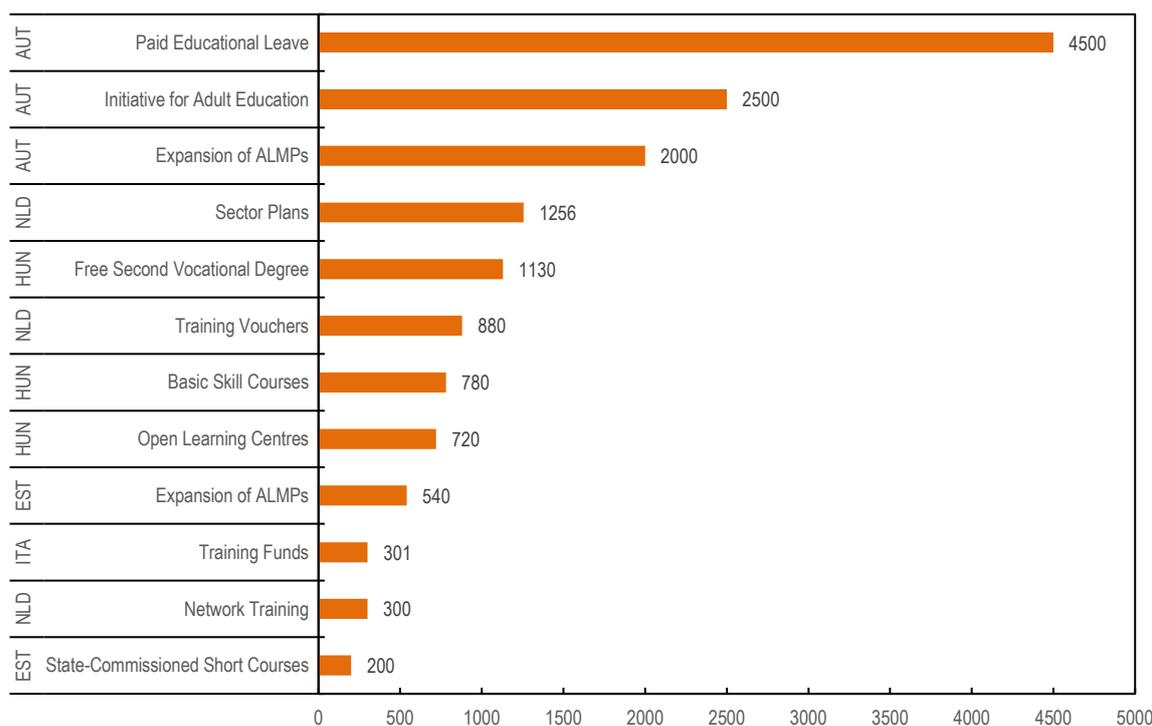
Funding was typically distributed through **calls for proposals** to public or private education providers who meet specific quality standards. In some cases funds were directly provided to individuals in the form of training vouchers, which allowed them to choose from the training options available in the market.

Adapting policies and programmes based on lessons from implementation is important for success.

Reforms are often altered along the way, compared with their initial design. Adaptations are often based on information generated through **monitoring progress, evaluating results** or bringing together providers of adult learning to **share experiences**. Adaptation mechanisms should be envisaged in the design of policies or programmes. Incorporating lessons learnt along the way provides an opportunity to overcome barriers to take-up, to identify bottlenecks and to improve the reform's overall effectiveness. Cost-benefit analysis should be used early on to monitor cost-effectiveness and to adapt implementation accordingly



Chart 2. Estimated yearly funding per participant (EUR)



Source: OECD (2020) Increasing adult learning participation: Learning from successful reforms.

Note: Calculated as a simple average of minimum and maximum values when a range was provided in the report. The Austrian Paid Educational leave refers to the part-time version of the policy.

How are countries increasing AL participation?

- ☞ **Comprehensiveness:** In 2014, Estonia launched its *Lifelong Learning Strategy*, a comprehensive strategy to set priorities and guide funding decisions. The strategy is being implemented through nine programmes.
- ☞ **Stakeholder involvement:** In Singapore, the **Future Economy Council** oversees the implementation of all *SkillsFuture measures*. It brings together high-level stakeholders to participate in **the governance** of the skill development system including ministers, social partners and unusually by international comparison, education providers and a large number of individual employers.
- ☞ **Funding:** In Estonia, *ALMPs* are funded through the **employers' share of the unemployment insurance premium**, which amounts to 1.4% of gross payroll. Moreover, different aspects of *Training-Related ALMP reforms* were first **experimented** using **ESF**, then made permanent and financed through the public employment services when deemed successful.
- ☞ **Policy learning:** Since its introduction in 1998, the *Paid Educational Leave* in Austria has developed from attracting less than 2 000 participants to reaching over 15 000 people every year by **adapting the programme based on evidence from evaluations**. Two of the bottlenecks identified and removed were the low benefit amount and the long minimum duration of the training.
- ☞ **Quality:** For the Hungarian *Open Learning Centres*, **tailoring education to adults** and establishing a positive learning culture is considered very important for successfully engaging adults with low skills: **teaching content** relates to adult's everyday lives and focuses on instantly usable aspects; **teachers** are experienced in working with adults; and **courses** are short and delivered in a relaxed atmosphere surrounded by modern technology.
- ☞ **Inclusiveness:** *Adult Education Centres* in Italy aim to raise the competencies of **adults with low skills** or low qualifications. They provide courses to develop basic literacy, ICT and national language skills. *Sector Plans* in the Netherlands are focused on **50+ year-old unemployed** individuals who represent about 1% of the 25-64 year-old population.
- ☞ **Alignment:** To access the Dutch *Training Vouchers*, individuals have to sign up for training that would **increase their employment opportunities**. They can either submit an **agreement**, where an employer commits to hire them after completing the training, or pursue training related to **'shortage occupations'** in their region.

High participation rates are not sufficient for a well-functioning and future-ready adult learning system.

To achieve positive labour market outcomes for participants, policy-makers should not only focus on participation rates, but also on training **quality, inclusion** of disadvantaged groups and **alignment** with individual and labour market needs.

Quality is a multidimensional concept and difficult to measure. **Minimum quality criteria** and standards, as well as **certification mechanisms** can ensure that participants benefit from training in terms of societal or labour market outcomes. When providing education to adults, curricula as well as teaching methods should be adapted to their needs and preferences, which are very different from those of children. **Programmes carefully designed for vulnerable groups** such as migrants, elderly or low-skilled workers can help in tackling their specific barriers to participation. Taking into account updated results from **skills assessment and anticipation** exercises can help keep policies relevant, even in a context of changing skill needs.

References

OECD (2020), *Increasing adult learning participation: Learning from successful reforms*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/cf5d9c21-en>

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Contact

Glenda Quintini (Glenda.Quintini@oecd.org)
Anja Meierkord (Anja.Meierkord@oecd.org)