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## Foreword

Globalisation, technological progress and demographic change are having a profound impact on the world of work. These mega-trends are affecting the number and quality of jobs that are available, how they are carried out and the skills that workers will need in the future to succeed in the labour market. Although the timing and the speed of these developments differ across countries, it is expected that skill needs will continue to change, possibly at an accelerated pace, in the coming decades affecting advanced, emerging and developing countries alike.

While these changes in the world of work affect everyone, adults with low skills are most at risk of experiencing a deterioration in their labour market prospects. The demand for their skills is decreasing, as many jobs they traditionally do are automated or off-shored in advanced economies. OECD research shows that occupations that require no specific skills and training have the highest risk of being automated. At the same time, adults with low skills often have limited opportunities to develop their skills further through education and training. Many find themselves caught in a 'low-skills trap', in low-level positions with limited opportunities for development and on-the-job learning, and experiencing frequent and sometimes prolonged spells of unemployment. Therefore, addressing the specific training barriers of low-skilled adults is imperative for them to progress in the labour market and access better jobs.

This booklet highlights seven action points to create more and better learning opportunities for adults with low skills. It provides practical insights for stakeholders who are directly involved with engaging low-skilled adults in learning, including policy-makers, learning providers and the social partners. Each action point draws on research evidence and provides insights on how it can be translated into practice by highlighting promising policies in OECD and emerging countries.

The document is part of a series of publications on the functioning, effectiveness and resilience of adult learning systems in the context of a changing world of work. It accompanies the OECD report on Getting Skills Right: Future-ready Adult Learning Systems, which includes the OECD Priorities for Adult Learning dashboard ([www.oecd.org/employment/skills-and-work/adult-learning/dashboard.htm](http://www.oecd.org/employment/skills-and-work/adult-learning/dashboard.htm)) and a cross-country analysis of the readiness of adult learning systems to address future skill challenges.

The OECD and JPMorgan Chase Foundation have joined efforts to support policy makers, firms and individuals to make the most of ongoing changes through adult learning. Together we can truly contribute to 'getting skills right' and create more responsive training systems and inclusive labour markets for the world of tomorrow.

### Please cite as

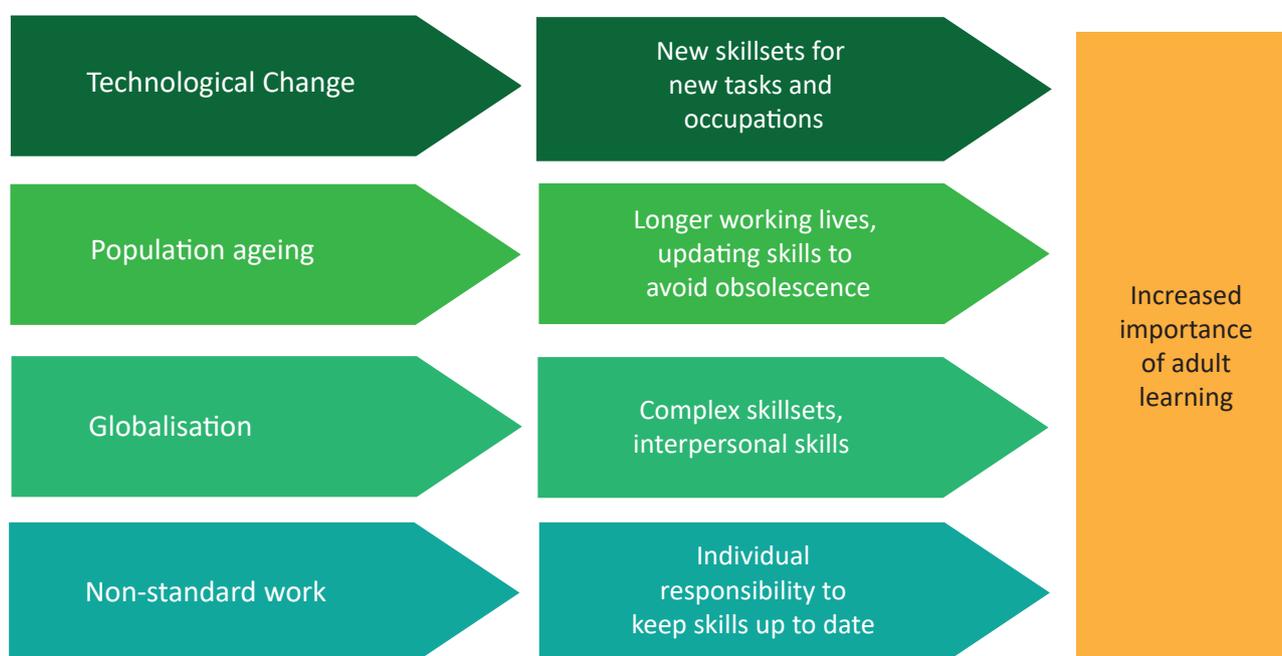
OECD (2019), Getting Skills Right: Engaging low-skilled adults in learning, ([www.oecd.org/employment/emp/engaging-low-skilled-adults-2019.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/employment/emp/engaging-low-skilled-adults-2019.pdf)).

# Introduction

## *The world of work is changing*

New technologies, population ageing and globalisation are changing what we do at work and how we do it. According to OECD estimates, 46% of workers may lose their jobs or see it change significantly because of automation in the coming decades (Nedelkoska and Quintini, 2018). We will need more complex skillsets to do jobs that will be available in a context of transformation due to automation and offshoring. We will also retire later than in the past.

### **Megatrends affect the world of work**



Some jobs will become more efficient and flexible thanks to these changes: a sales person in a bookshop can spend more time speaking to customers and less time keeping an inventory of their store. Other jobs however, such as long-distance truck driving, may disappear and be done by robots in the future. We will have to adapt, learn new skills and further develop the skills we already have to shape, and benefit from, this changing world or work.

At the same time, new forms of work and less linear career pathways have stimulated a lively debate about access to training. While employers traditionally take on much responsibility for the training of employees, the expansion of non-standard employment is shifting the responsibility of life-long learning to the individual.

We can also expect that climate change, global warming and the transition towards a low-carbon economy will influence the number and types of jobs that are available and how we do them.

## *Adults with low skills are most affected by these changes*

While these changes in the world of work affect everyone, adults with lower skills are likely to be most affected. The demand for their skills is decreasing as many low-skilled jobs can be automated or off-shored. OECD research shows that those occupations which require no specific skills and training have the highest risk of being automated, e.g. food preparation assistants, labourers and assemblers. At the same time, technological change makes those with high skills, such as managers, teachers or health professionals, more productive and hence more sought after by employers (Nedelkoska and Quintini, 2018).

Adults with low skills can find themselves in a 'low-skill trap'. Many have low-level positions with limited opportunities for development, frequently step in and out of unemployed and can often expect limited returns to training, such as higher wages or access to better jobs (OECD, 2017a; Burdett and Smith, 2002).

## *More targeted action is needed*

Supporting adults with low skills to upskill and reskill is imperative for a future of work that is both more productive and inclusive. It helps individuals to increase their employability and ultimately their social inclusion. From an employer perspective, a skilled workforce makes it easier to develop and introduce new technologies and work organisation practices, thereby boosting productivity and growth in the economy as a whole.

This booklet highlights seven areas of action for policy-makers, social partners, public employment services and learning providers that can help to create more and better learning opportunities for adults with low skills.

# Who are low-skilled adults?

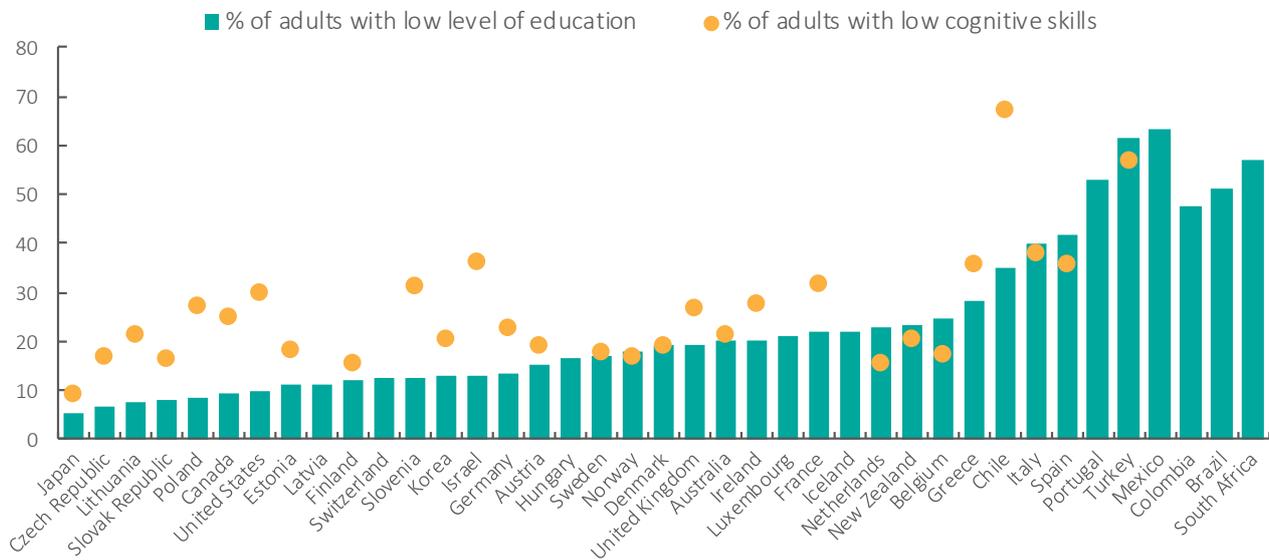
In this publication, adults with low skills are defined as:

- Adults with low educational levels, namely those whose highest qualification is at lower-secondary level (ISCED 0-2), which means they have not completed high-school or equivalent, or
- Adults with low cognitive skill levels, namely those who score at proficiency level 1 or below in the literacy and/or numeracy dimension of the OECD survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC). These are adults who can at most complete very simple reading tasks, such as read brief texts on familiar topics, and mathematical tasks, such as one-step or simple processes involving counting, sorting, basic arithmetic operations and understanding simple percentages.

In addition, we recognise that low digital skills are an obstacle to adults' societal and economic participation and constitute an additional dimension of low skills.

Using this definition, we see that more than one in five adults in the OECD has low skills. 22% of adults across OECD countries have low educational levels and even more adults have low cognitive skills. On average 26.3% of adults are at most able to complete some very basic reading and/or mathematical tasks in those countries for which data are available. Enabling them to up-skill for a changing world of work is a sizeable challenge.

**Adults with low skills across OECD countries**



Note: level of education is defined as below upper-secondary education, low cognitive skills is defined as literacy and or numeracy proficiency level 1 or below as assessed by PIAAC. Data for Belgium refers to Flanders only; data for the United Kingdom refers to England and Northern Ireland only; adults aged 25-64; data on cognitive skills are not available for Brazil, Colombia, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Mexico, South Africa and Switzerland. Source: OECD education statistics database (2016), PIAAC (2012).

It is important to note that many adults with low skills are anything but 'low skilled': they may have low literacy and numeracy levels, but at the same time possess a range of other valuable skills such as the ability to drive different vehicles or care for customers. Equally, adults may have low qualification levels, but may have gained skills through years of work-experience that are equivalent to those associated with formal qualifications.



## Action 1 :

# Find creative ways to reach out to potential learners

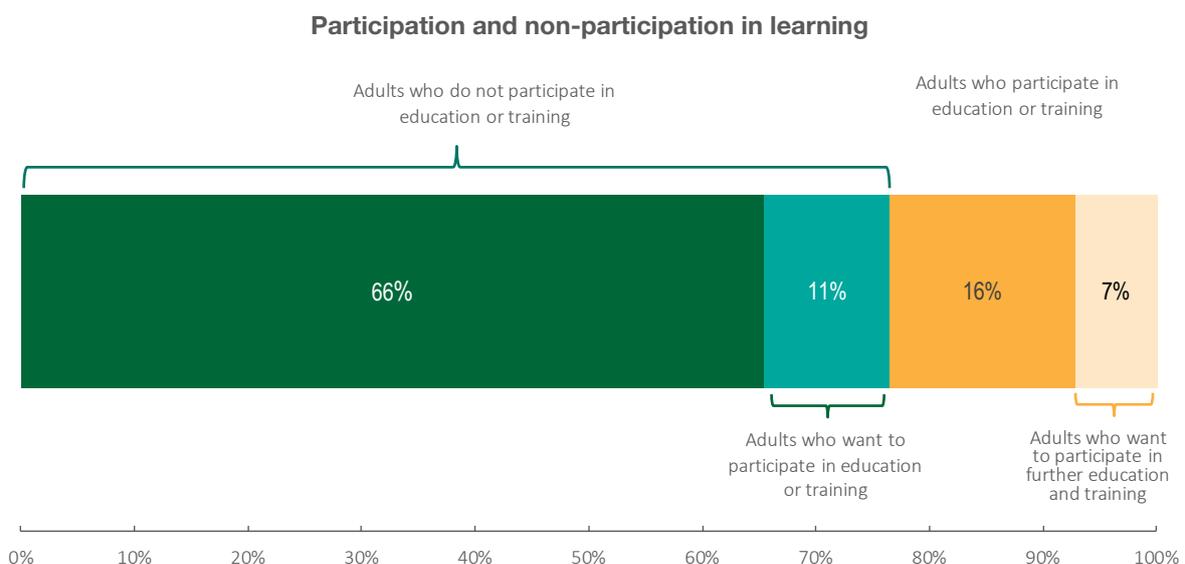
### Why is this important?

Participation in adult education and training helps people find, keep and further develop in their job. However, adults with low skills are less than half as likely to participate in adult learning as those with higher skills. According to PIAAC data, only 20% of adults with low skills participate in job-related adult learning. Participation of adults with medium and high skills is much higher (37% and 58% respectively). One of the key reasons for this participation gap is that adults with low skill levels find it more difficult to recognise their learning needs and hence are less likely to seek out training opportunities (Windisch, 2015). According to data from the 2016 Adult Education Survey (AES), 11.6% of adults with low skills looked for learning opportunities compared to 35.5% of adults with high skill levels.

To address this issue, awareness campaigns exist in many places, but there is little evidence that they are successful. The German campaign *Nur Mut - der nächste Schritt lohnt sich. Besser lesen und schreiben lernen*, for example, uses posters, TV and radio advertisement to engage adults with low-literacy skills. The evaluation of the campaign shows that while it raised the general population's awareness of the issue of literacy, it was less successful in reaching those with low skills themselves. An evaluation of the campaigns for the *Portuguese New Opportunities Initiative* had similar results (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). We need to find more creative and direct ways to improve the participation of adults with low skills in education and training activities.

## Did You Know ?

More than three in four adults with low skills across the OECD do not participate in job-related education and training in any given year, according to PIAAC data. This group encompasses 66% of adults who do not want to participate in learning and 11% who would like to, but do not for a variety of reasons.



Note: Average of OECD countries participating in PIAAC; formal and non-formal job-related education and training; total >100% due to rounding.  
Source: PIAAC data (2012, 2015).

## What can we do?

Active and direct outreach to adults with low skills is essential for engaging them in learning. Meeting adults in their day-to-day environment and using existing relationships to reach out to them, can help them connect with adult learning. See how others implement this in practice:

- Outreach through the workplace can be effective in engaging adults with low-skills, as the workplace is one of the key places where individuals identify their training needs and take part in training opportunities. Yet, those who lack basic skills might be hesitant or unable to communicate their training needs to employers. There is evidence that trade unions can provide a bridging function between employers and employees with low skills (Stuart et al., 2016; Parker, 2007). *Unionlearn* (United Kingdom) supports workers in acquiring skills and qualifications to improve their employability. One of its key activities is the training of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs), who help workers identify their training needs and arrange learning opportunities within their companies. Since its inception in 2006, Unionlearn has trained more than 40 000 ULRs. It provides learning opportunities to about 250 000 workers per year, including disproportionately high numbers of workers with no or low qualification levels according to independent evaluations (Stuart et al., 2016; Stuart et al., 2013).
- Family skill programmes approach adults in their role as parents, take place in the educational institutions of their children and link learning to their lived experience. They make use of the fact that kindergartens and schools are places that low-skilled adults with children regularly visit or are otherwise in contact with. The Viennese project *Mama lernt Deutsch! – Mum is learning German!* provides basic skills courses for mothers with low-educational levels and for whom German is not their first language. The programme takes place in their child's educational institution and in excursions to cultural, social and leisure institutions. It includes free child-care services.
- Community-based approaches can also build bridges between adults with low skills and learning opportunities. In Argentina, community leaders disseminate information on available training courses under the *Hacemos Futuro* programme. The programme supports early school leavers in gaining primary and secondary level qualifications. It also provides access to vocational training. Potential participants receive the relevant information via Whatsapp and bring together people in their community to pass on this information. This is particularly relevant in a context with low digitalisation and internet connectivity.
- Mobile outreach services are key to engaging those adults with low skills who have very limited links to workplaces or the community, in particular when they have been disengaged from the labour market for an extended period. The Brussels-based project *Formtruck* is a walk-in mobile information centre on training opportunities. It aims to engage low-qualified jobseekers and young people not in employment, education or training in locations where they usually spend time, e.g. at events, parks and public squares. Since its introduction in 2017, the truck has been used around 20 times per year. There are no evaluations on the effectiveness of this approach.

### Three key insights from existing practice:

- ⇒ *Actively reach out to adults in the places they frequent, including workplaces, community institutions and public spaces.*
- ⇒ *Identify actors that have established links with adults with low skills.*
- ⇒ *Build the capacity of these actors to inform adults with low skills and encourage them to take up learning opportunities.*





## Action 2 :

# Offer holistic and personalised advice and guidance

### Why is this important?

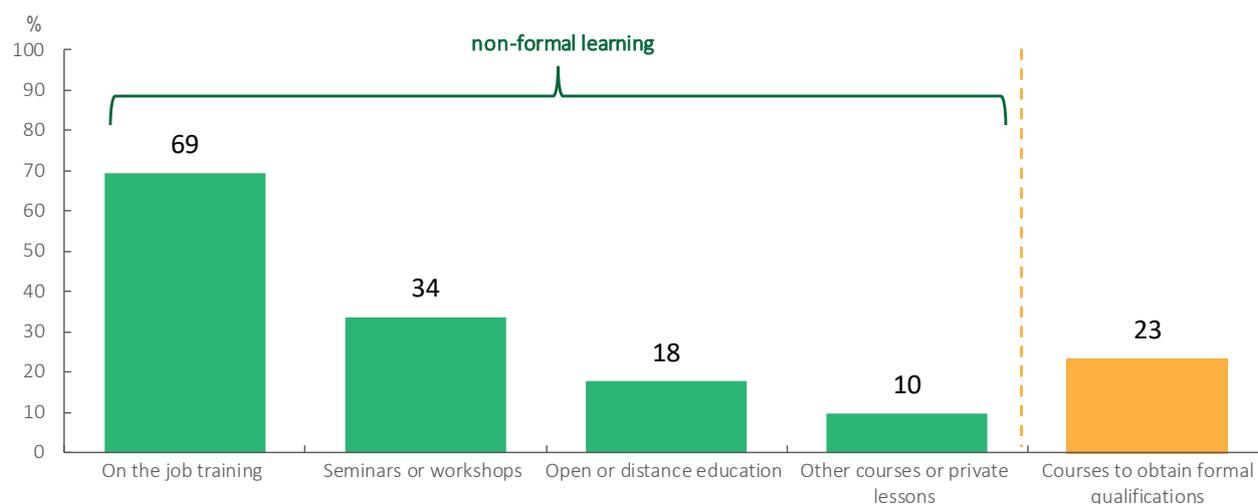
In most OECD countries, adults have the choice between many different learning opportunities. These can range from programmes to acquire formal basic and general education, through certified short-courses to gain specific skills, to non-formal learning opportunities in the workplace. There are many different providers and approaches to teaching and learning. It is a challenge for any adult to navigate this jungle of offers, especially those with low skills.

Adults with low skills need support in identifying their training needs and in understanding which type of training is most appropriate for them. Additionally, they need advice on how to tackle any barrier to participation, including limited finances, lack of time due to family commitments and distance to the training location. However, such comprehensive advice and guidance services specifically targeted at adults with low skills are rare.

### Did You Know ?

Non-formal learning opportunities make up a large share of all learning taken up by low skilled adults. Only 23% of learners take part in courses to obtain a formal qualification, while far more take part in non-formal learning opportunities: 69% of learners take part in on the job training, 34% learn in workshops and seminars, 18% through open or distance education and 10% participate in other courses or private lessons.

Participation in different types of adult learning activities



Note: Average of OECD countries participating in PIAAC, % of low-skilled adults who participate in formal and non-formal job-related training; totals do not sum to 100 percent because individuals can participate in multiple types of adult learning activities activities.  
Source: PIAAC data (2012, 2015).

## What can we do?

Advice and guidance for adults with low-skills is most successful when it is holistic, i.e. when it helps adults navigate education and training offers and other relevant services at the same time. This, however, requires skilled caseworkers, who have sufficient time and resources to provide tailored assistance to each individual. See how others implement this in practice:

- In Iceland, *Lifelong Learning Centres* provide education and career counselling with a specific focus on low skilled adults. A key strength of the centres are the skills of their staff: guidance counsellors typically have a diploma or master's degree in education and vocational counselling. The reach of the centres is broad: there are dozens of Lifelong Learning Centres around the country including in sparsely populated areas, which conduct around 10 000 guidance-counselling sessions with people with low qualification levels per year. Yet, there is room for improvement, in particular regarding the outreach to low-skilled adults and cooperation with companies.
- In Austria, *Bildungsberatung Österreich* offers independent and free counselling for adults on education and training opportunities in all Austrian federal states. The service specifically targets adults with disadvantages in the labour market, including the low-skilled, older adults, inactive adults and adults with a migrant background. Evaluations of previous versions of the programme had shown that these groups are not reached if they are not targeted specifically. Depending on the federal state, adults can chose from a range of modes to receive guidance, including face-to-face, on the phone or online via skype or chat. The service is provided in 16 languages, although not all languages are spoken in every location.
- The European policy experimentation project GOAL (*Guidance and Orientation Interventions for Low-Educated Adults*) ran between February 2015 and January 2018 in Belgium (Flanders), Czech Republic, Iceland, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Slovenia and was funded by the Erasmus+ programme. The project developed and expanded educational guidance services for low-educated adults, with the goal of increasing their participation in education and training. The evaluation of the programme emphasises two key learning points: Firstly, partnerships can ensure that guidance addresses the full range of issues faced by adults and not just the issues covered by one particular service. However, partnerships also come with coordination costs. Secondly, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to providing advice and guidance. The type of guidance provided must be tailored to the individual needs and context of the adult (Carpentieri et al., 2018).

### Three key insights from existing practice:

- ⇒ *Develop holistic advice and guidance services specifically for low-skilled adults.*
- ⇒ *Set-up one-stop shops and establish partnerships with other organisations serving adults with low-skills to ensure that they get holistic advice.*
- ⇒ *Ensure that guidance services are provided by qualified staff, who have the ability to tailor the service to the needs and situation of each adult individually.*





## Action 3 : Create interesting and relevant learning opportunities

### *Why is this important?*

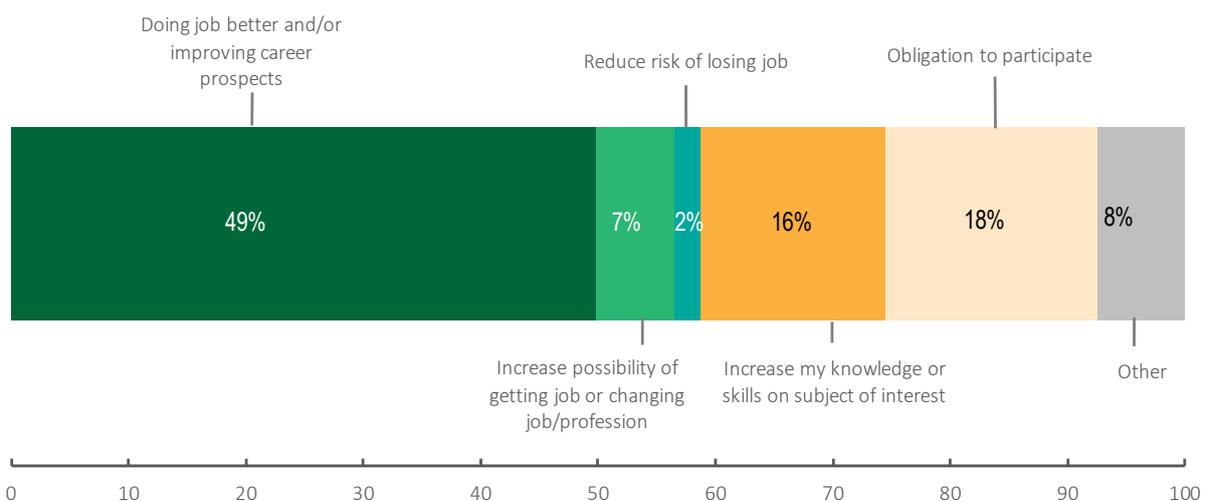
Adults learn differently than children. We know that adults learn best when learning is put into context (for example their workplace environment) and when it is practical and problem-oriented (Knowles, 1984). Yet, in some places large parts of adult learning continues to take place in the classroom. It often mimics the teaching and learning styles we know from school. This approach is especially problematic for adults with low skills, as many of them have experienced failure in education and may find it difficult to return to a classroom setting.

What is more, the majority of low-skilled adults takes part in learning to advance their career (see below). However, learning opportunities do not always equip them with the skills needed for the labour market. According to AES data, only two in three adults think that participation in training helped them achieve positive employment outcomes, such as performing better in their current job, being promoted, getting a (new) job or a higher salary. Further, two in five adults who take part in training, participate in health and safety training only, according to the Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS). While knowledge on health and safety is an important requirement to reduce the likelihood of work accidents, it is part of compulsory training and does not necessarily help people to prepare for the future of work. We need innovation to make adult learning more interesting and relevant for adults with low skills.

### Did You Know ?

Most adults with low skills participate in training to improve their labour market outcomes. The majority (49%) choose to participate in job-related training to do their job better and/or improve their career prospect. A further 7% participate to get a (new) job and 2% do so to decrease the likelihood of losing their job.

**Reasons for participation in job-related training**



Note: Average of OECD countries participating in PIAAC; non-formal job-related education and training only.  
Source: PIAAC data (2012,2015).

## What can we do?

Successful adult learning provision takes into account how adults learn. This means that it must be hands-on, problem-oriented and closely linked to the context of the learner, most notably his or her workplace. When it comes to the mode of learning, there is not one way that works for every person and adults should have access to a range of different ways to learn. See how others implement this in practice:

- Embedding basic skill training in the workplace is the approach of the Norwegian programme *Skills Plus Work*. Since 2006, the programme has supported more than 30 000 adults in acquiring reading, writing, numeracy and digital skills. Private and public enterprises can apply for grants for the training of their employees. Trainings must combine work and basic skill training (and ideally other job-related training) and aim to strengthen workers' motivation to learn. Guidance for the design of programmes is provided in the form of profiles of basic job-related skills for different professions, learning materials and national standards for basic skills for adults. For adults who are not in employment, a similar programme led by the voluntary sector exists.
- Blended learning is key to *General Assembly's* approach to education. General Assembly is a primarily US-based private education provider, which provides training in today's most in-demand skills, such as coding, data design or digital marketing. While their courses typically target adults with high skills, their approach to blended learning is likely to be relevant for low skilled adults as well. At General Assembly, learners can learn a certain skill in different ways, including online self-learning, expert-instructed learning in a classroom and small group learning. Key to the approach is that even though the best results can be achieved when individuals take part in the full blended model, each learning mode is stand-alone, i.e. individuals can decide to learn using their preferred mode only.
- Story-based learning lies at the core of the German project *eVideoTransfer*. Since 2012, the project offers digital learning opportunities for workers with low basic skills and limited time to take-part in classroom learning. This project develops industry-specific training, which combine learning content on basic skills and professional knowledge. All training is web-based and takes the learner through an engaging storyline, which is conveyed through videos. Users must have a basic level of digital literacy, although a learning module about how to use mouse and keyboard was developed to reach a wider target group. EVideoTransfer is implemented by the education provider Arbeit und Leben – DGB/MHS Berlin-Brandenburg and funded by the Germany Ministry of Education.

### Three key insights from existing practice:

- ⇒ *Take into account how adults learn when designing learning opportunities. Opportunities should be practical, problem-oriented and closely linked to the (work) context of the learner.*
- ⇒ *Offer blended learning opportunities, which give learners the option to choose a way of learning that works best for them.*
- ⇒ *Ensure that the learning mode is appropriate for the target group, make learning enjoyable (e.g. through gamification), and provide additional support where needed (e.g. for online learning).*



Engaging low-skilled adults in learning:  
a sample of interesting practices





## Action 4 : Recognise existing skills

### Why is this important?

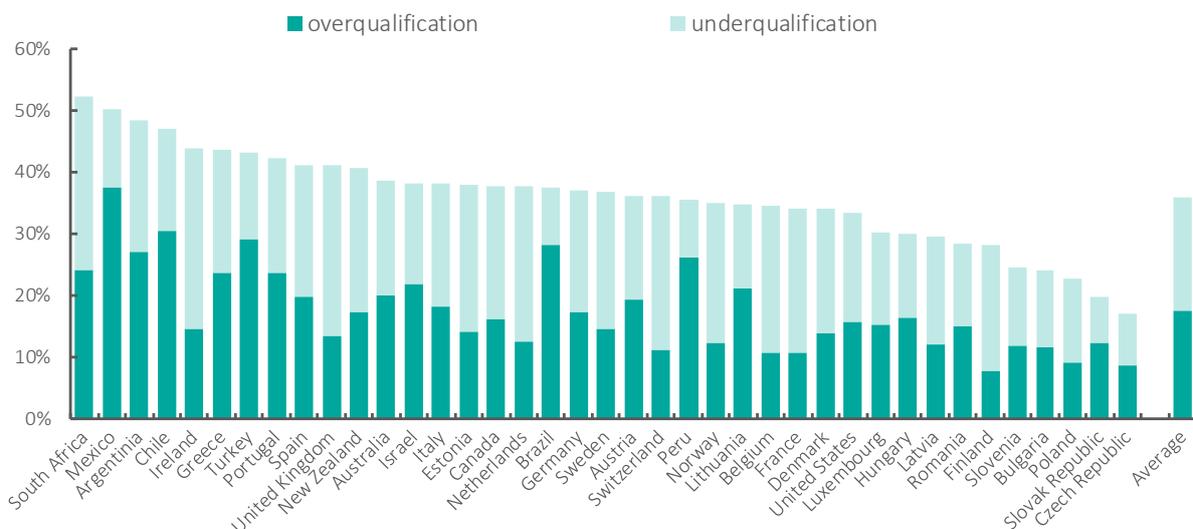
Many adults with low skills are anything but 'low skilled': they may have low literacy and numeracy levels, but at the same time they possess a range of other valuable skills such as the ability to drive different vehicles or care for customers. Equally, adults may have low qualification levels, but may have gained skills through years of work-experience that are equivalent to those associated with formal qualifications.

Recognising these skills through validation and certification can benefit individuals, employers and the economy. For the individual, it recognises their (informal) learning effort, which can increase motivation and become a stepping-stone to further (formal) learning. Employers benefit from skill recognition through higher productivity, by being able to better match employees' skillsets and jobs. The benefits of skill validation and certification for the individual and employer, in turn, improve labour market functioning (Kis and Windisch, 2018). For these positive effects to materialise, it is important that employers and society at large value certificates that are obtained through skill recognition and see them as equivalent to those acquired through formal learning.

### Did You Know ?

Many adults work in jobs they are not formally qualified for. We refer to this as qualification mismatch. According to data from the OECD Skills for Jobs database, 18% of adults work in jobs that typically require a lower qualification than they hold, i.e. they are overqualified. Additionally, 19% of adults work in jobs that typically require a higher qualification than they hold, i.e. they are underqualified. Research suggests that mismatches have a negative effect on job satisfaction and wages of the individual and can lead to lower productivity and increased turnover at firm level (OECD, 2017c).

Qualification mismatch across countries



Note: Average of countries included in the Skills for Jobs Database.  
Source: OECD Skills for Jobs data.

## What can we do?

There is no unique approach to the recognition of existing skills. The aims, processes and methods of recognition procedures vary widely across contexts. What is common to all procedures is that they can be difficult to navigate. Putting in place advice and guidance services that support individuals prior, during and after the recognition procedures are crucial to ensuring that these procedures are effective. See how others are doing this in practice:

- In Portugal, *Qualifica Centres* are comprehensive one-stop shops for guidance on lifelong learning. The centres target adults with low qualifications, the unemployed and young people not in employment, education or training. One of the main responsibilities of the centres is the recognition of competences, which is embedded in their overall guidance offer. Any adult seeking advice at one of the 303 Qualifica Centres undergoes a standardised four-step process: i) information and enrolment, ii) analysis and development of a skill profile, iii) discussion and definition of appropriate education and training path, iv) referral to recognition procedures or appropriate education and training provision.

To enter the recognition procedures, adults must be older than 18 years and have a minimum of 3 years professional experience. The process entails the preparation of a skill portfolio and a written, oral or practical exam. A jury awards a certificate of total or partial recognition. Partial recognition can lead to full recognition through the completion of modular training, although local provision may vary and not always be in line with the identified training needs. In 2017, 28 804 adults enrolled in recognition procedures and 10 157 received a certificate.

- France has a long-standing tradition of recognising and certifying existing skills (*Validation des acquis de l'expérience – VAE*), although take-up is traditionally low. In recent years, access to the recognition procedure has been made more inclusive for adults with low qualification levels (Mathou, 2016) and employers are now obliged to inform their employees about VAE every two years in the context of their professional development. Adults can gain recognition for around 1 300 qualifications by demonstrating that they have the relevant skills through work experience. Different bodies are responsible for implementing VAE and law, decrees and frameworks ensure consistency between procedures.

The validation procedure has been described as demanding and lengthy, in particular for adults with low skills (Mathou, 2016). For example, adults must not only be able demonstrate their previous experience in their written skill portfolio, but also be able to verbalise and reflect on their experience in a jury interview. Since late 2014, adults have the right to support during the VAE process, including in the preparation of the portfolio and interview process. In practice, the support is provided by the responsible bodies awarding the qualification or specific counselling providers. Adults also have access to specific VAE leave.

### Three key insights from existing practice:

- ⇒ Give adults with low skills access to skill recognition procedures.
- ⇒ Offer hands-on advice and guidance services that help adults with low skills navigate and prepare for the recognition process.
- ⇒ Use employers to raise awareness of recognition procedures.





## Action 5 : Provide modular learning opportunities

### *Why is this important?*

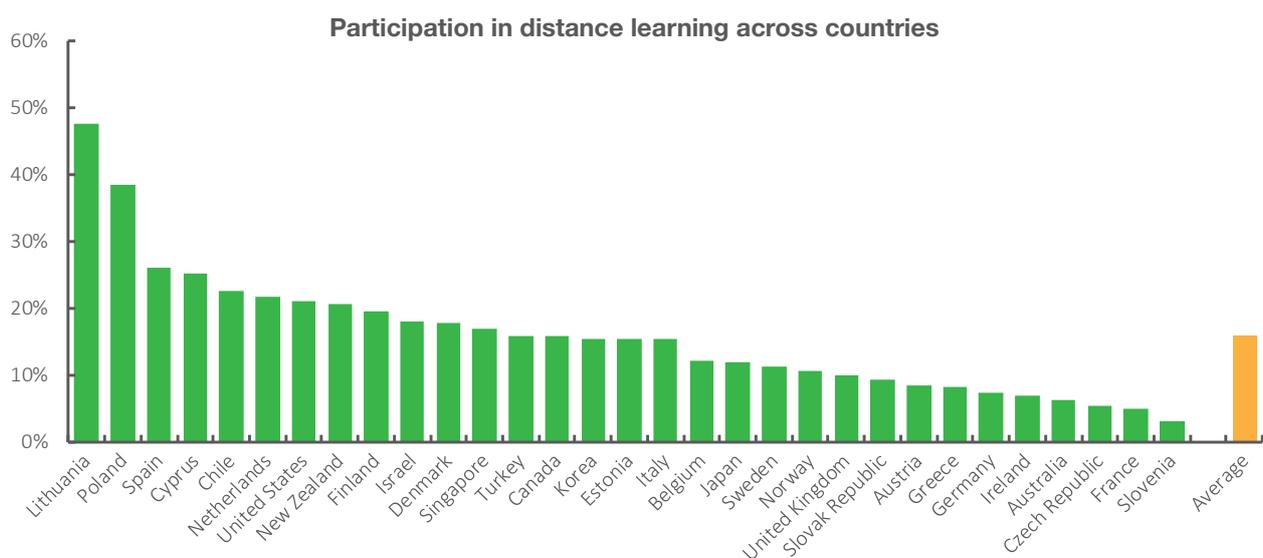
Not many adults have the time and motivation to take-part in lengthy courses to upskill or reskill. In many countries, it will take years to retrain as a social worker, if you have previously worked on the assembly line in manufacturing. There is some evidence that adults with low-skills are less willing to participate in time-intensive training than high-skilled workers, not least due to different preferences and personality traits of both groups (Fouarge, Schils and de Grip, 2013).

Modular training programmes can enable adults to learn in their own time and shape their own learning path. In contrast to traditional learning programmes, which need to be completed in full to gain a qualification, modular provision divides a learning programme into self-contained modules. Each module has its own distinct learning outcomes, which are certified as credits or part-qualifications once completed. Learners can work towards a full qualification over time by successively adding modules to their learning portfolio.

Ideally, this portfolio also includes skills assessed in skill recognition procedures. In this way, adults with low skills can focus on acquiring those skills they are missing towards a full qualification.

### Did You Know ?

One way to make adult learning more flexible is distance learning, for example in the form of online self-learning. According to OECD PIAAC data, 16% of low-skilled learners complete at least part of their training as distance learning. However, the situation differs vastly between countries. Close to every second learner with low skills takes part in distance learning in Lithuania, while this is the case for less than one in twenty learners in Slovenia.



Note: Average of OECD countries participating in PIAAC; job-related education and training only; % of learners.  
Source: PIAAC data (2012,2015).

## What can we do?

In the last decades, adults have increasingly had access to modular learning opportunities. There are different approaches to modularising adult learning provision, for example concerning the number of learning hours associated with each module. What is clear is that modular learning opportunities work best when embedded in an already well-integrated adult learning system (OECD, 2003). See how others are implementing this in practice:

- Switzerland is one of the front-runners when it comes to offering modular training opportunities. In the mid-1990s, the modularization of different programmes was piloted, with the view to collect practical experience and explore the potential for upscaling this approach throughout the system. Some of these pilots were evaluated, but modularisation was fast progressing even in the absence of much evaluation evidence (Wettstein, 2005). Today, modular programmes are available throughout the adult learning sector. Adults can take part in individual modules or combine different modules to form a full training programme.
- Similarly, Denmark has a long tradition of offering modular programmes. In Denmark, the modularization of adult learning offers an exceptional amount of flexibility for learners. In fact, learners are able to combine modules from different types of adult learning provision to obtain a formal qualification. This includes provision as diverse as active labour market programmes, basic education programmes, higher education, vocational education and even non-formal liberal education programmes. This flexible approach allows high shares of adults to obtain qualifications through adult learning (Desjardins, 2017).
- In Mexico, the Model for Life and Work Programme (*Modelo Educación para la Vida y el Trabajo, MEVyT*) allows adults to gain a primary or secondary education degree. MEVyT is a highly flexible programme, which allows learners to choose between different modules at initial, intermediate (primary education) and advanced (lower secondary education) level. Subjects covered include language and communications, mathematics and science, social development and citizenship, as well as civic education. The programme enables individuals to create their own programme of learning and gives them choice on the mode of learning. Learners can study on their own, in group settings in community learning centres, in a mobile learning space or online (*MEVyT en línea*).
- The Flemish Community in Belgium started to modularise its adult basic education, which targets low skilled adults, in the early 2000s. Adult basic education is provided in 13 *Centres of Basic Education* and includes literacy, numeracy, ICT and societal knowledge courses. The provision is now fully modular. Adults obtain a partial certificate after each module they attend, which can lead to a full qualification.

### Three key insights from existing practice:

- ⇒ Structure each adult learning programme to consist of a number of self-contained learning modules.
- ⇒ Provide adults with micro-credentials for successfully completing individual modules and allow them to combine these to achieve a full qualification.
- ⇒ Give adults the opportunity to choose modules from different types of provision to create their individual learning path.





## Action 6 : Give people time off to participate in learning

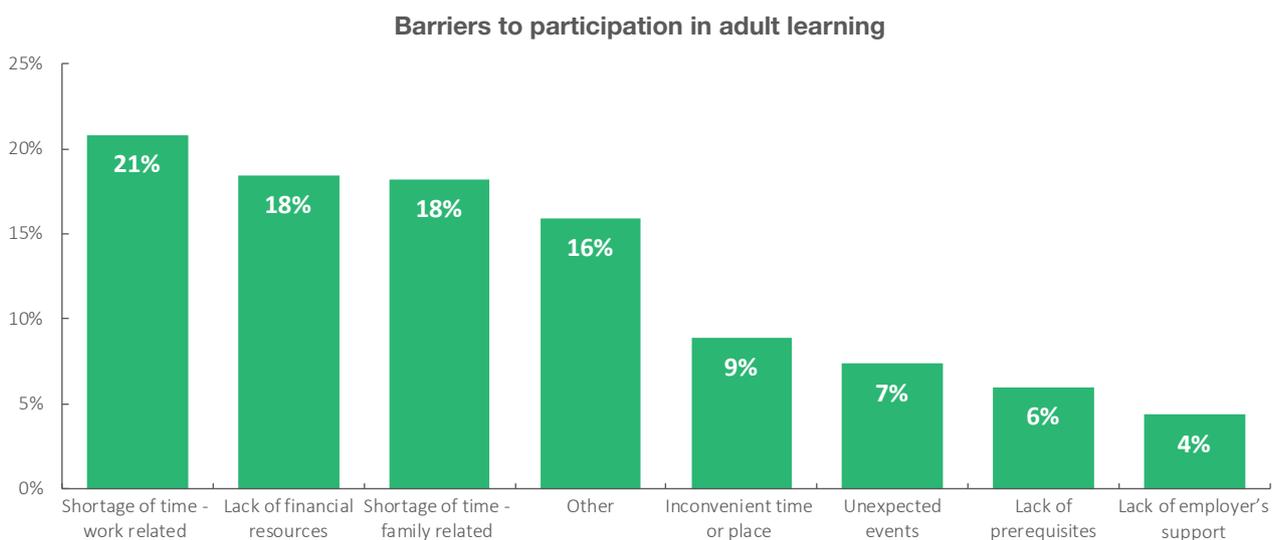
### *Why is this important?*

Most adults with low skills lead busy lives with family and work commitments, which leave little time for learning. In fact, shortage of time is the biggest barrier to learning participation for low-skilled adults according to OECD PIAAC data, be this due to work related (22%) or family related reasons (19%). At the same time, adults with low skills have limited bargaining power when asking their employer for time off to participate in training. Further, they often cannot afford to take unpaid leave to pursue training.

Giving every adult, including the low-skilled, the right to take leave for education and training purposes can increase training participation. This should go hand-in-hand with other measures that increase flexibility and allow adults to fit learning into their busy schedules, such as evening and weekend provision, part-time and modular programmes and distance learning.

### Did You Know ?

The greatest barriers to participation in education and training for adults with low skills is shortage of time, be this work-related (21%) or family-related (18%). A fairly large share of adults who wanted to participate in adult learning but did not, were hindered by a lack of financial resources (18%). The place and time of the training (9%), lack of prerequisites (6%) and lack of employer's support (4%) are obstacles for a smaller part of the population.



Note: Average of OECD countries participating in PIAAC.  
Source: PIAAC data (2012, 2015).

## What can we do?

Education and training leave gives adults time away from work to take part in learning. There is paid and unpaid training leave. During paid training leave the learner continues to receive (part of) their salary. Unpaid leave gives learners simply the opportunity to return to their position after their leave. Education and training leaves are typically regulated by either legislation or collective agreements, but some employers may have their own bi-laterally agreed leave arrangements. See how others implement this in practice:

- In Japan, the *Human Resources Development Promotion Act* stipulates that employers should support the skill development of their employees by granting them paid education and training leave, long-term study leave and leave for job searching activities. However, the 2016 employer survey of human resources development revealed that implementation of the act is weak, with only 10% of employers having introduced a system of education and training leave.
- In Austria, employees can apply for training leave of 2-12 month duration (*Bildungskarenz*). The maximum leave granted is 12 months every 4 years. However, the right to training leave is not universal, but employer dependent. The leave itself is typically unpaid, but those eligible for unemployment benefits can receive a training benefit from the public employment services. The training benefit paid is equivalent to the unemployment benefit, but must be at least EUR 14.5 per day.
- In Luxembourg, employees, self-employed people and people with liberal professions have access to *paid training leave* of up to 80 days over the course of their professional career and a maximum of 20 days every two years. Paid training leave only covers one third of the training time, i.e. for three days (24 hours) of training time, learners can receive one day (8 hours) of leave. During the leave, employees are paid their average salary, up to a cap of four times the social minimum wage for unskilled workers. Employers can be reimbursed for these payments and related social security contributions by the state. Self-employed workers and those in the liberal professions must file for reimbursement directly.
- Generous *paid educational leave* for employees is available in Belgium (Flanders). Full-time – and in some cases part-time – employees have access to 125 hours of training leave per year (from 2019) to take part in training courses on in-demand skills. Employees continue to receive their wages during the leave period, up to a limit of EUR 2 871 per month. Employers can receive compensation from the regional government at EUR 21.30 per hour.

### Three key insights from existing practice:

- ⇒ Give individuals the right to education and training leave, either by law, through collective agreements or bilateral agreements with employers.
- ⇒ Compensate learners and employers for foregone earnings and social security contributions during the time of leave, either partially or in full.
- ⇒ Make provisions for adults in non-standard employment relationships, notably the self-employed.





## Action 7 :

### Provide financial support for all costs of training

#### Why is this important?

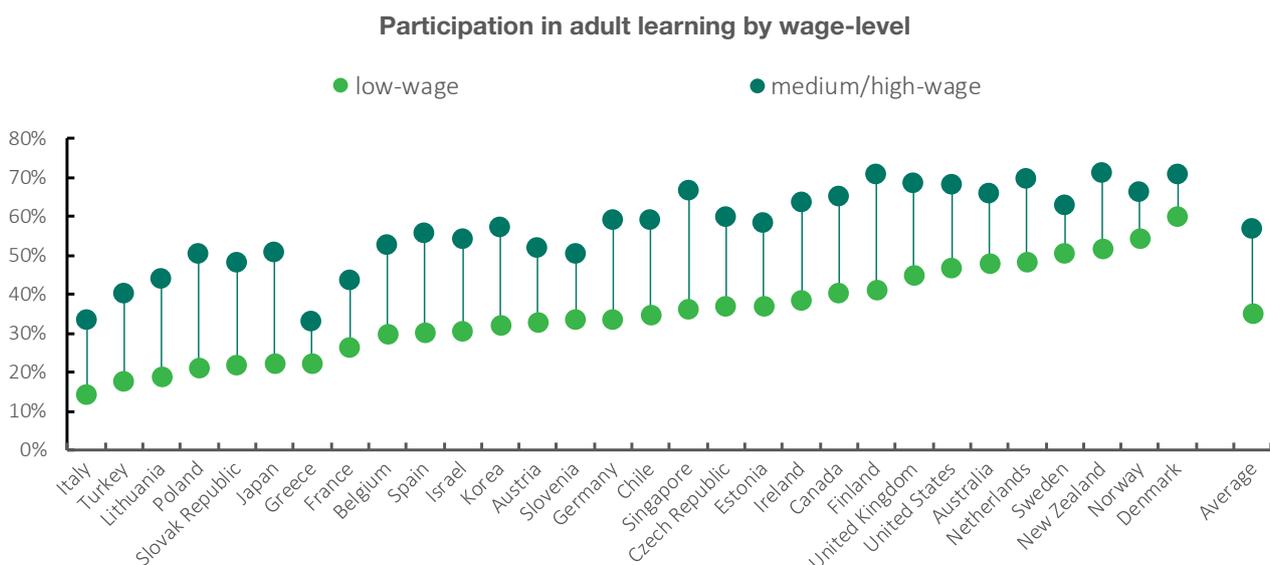
Many low-skilled adults do not participate in learning, because they have limited financial resources. According to OECD PIAAC data, this constitutes a barrier for 17% of low-skilled adults who would like to participate. Adults with low-skills often dip in and out of unemployment or have low-level, low-paid positions with limited opportunities for employer-paid professional development. When they take part in learning, their time and resource investments do not always pay off. Consequently, there is a large participation gap between adults with low and those with medium-high wages (22 percentage points).

Targeted financial incentives can make adult learning systems more equitable and prevent under-investment. In their design, it should be taken into consideration who benefits financially from training participation and hence should contribute.

#### Did You Know ?

There are vast differences in adult learning participation depending on someone's wage. On average across countries, 35% of adults with low wage participate in adult learning, while 57% of those with medium and high wage do. This participation gap varies between countries.

Some countries, such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden, manage to combine relatively high levels of participation with small differences between groups of people with different wage-levels. Others, such as Greece, have small differences between wage-levels, but relatively low participation overall.



Note: Average of OECD countries participating in PIAAC; job-related education and training only; low-wage is defined as earning at most two third of the national median wage.  
Source: PIAAC data (2012,2015).

## What can we do?

Financial incentives to encourage training participation exist in many countries. They include wage and training subsidies, tax incentives, loans at preferential rates and individualised learning account schemes (OECD, 2017b). See how others implement this in practice:

- Unemployed adults with low skills have access to training vouchers in the United States. The vouchers are called *Individual Training Accounts (ITAs)* and are funded under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Low skilled adults can receive funding for approved training programmes, which prepare for work in in-demand sectors and occupations. The decision of which skills are in-demand is based on labour market information at state and/or local level. In the 2016 fiscal year, \$453 million worth of vouchers were awarded.
- Estonia's public employment services offer a *Degree Study Allowance* to employed and unemployed adults with insufficient or outdated skills, who may have trouble finding a job or be at risk of redundancy. Individuals can receive a monthly allowance when studying towards a vocational, higher professional or bachelor-degree qualification. The allowance is only paid for skills that are in demand according to the analysis of sectoral skill needs conducted by the Estonian Qualifications Authority. The level of the allowance is income dependent: adults with income (including unemployment benefits, parental benefits and pensions) receive EUR 130 per month, while those without any income receive EUR 260 per month. According to data from the public employment services, between January and September 2018, 381 people received the degree study allowance every month.
- The Slovakian programme *REPAS+* offers professional retraining courses in line with labour market demands. It is complemented by the programme *KOMPAS+*, which supports the development of soft skills, such as communication and computer skills. Participants in both programmes receive a subsidy to the course fee and travel and subsistence allowances. Learners receive EUR 4.64/day while attending the training course. In 2017, 17 317 people took part in these programmes. The programme is co-funded by the European Social Fund. Public Employment Services administer both programmes.
- Similarly, *Adult Upgrading Grants* in British Columbia (Canada) cover the in-direct costs of participating in training. All Adult Basic Education and English Language Learning programmes are free of charge at public post-secondary institutions. For low-income learners, the grant covers additional costs, such as fees, books and supplies, transportation and unsubsidised childcare.

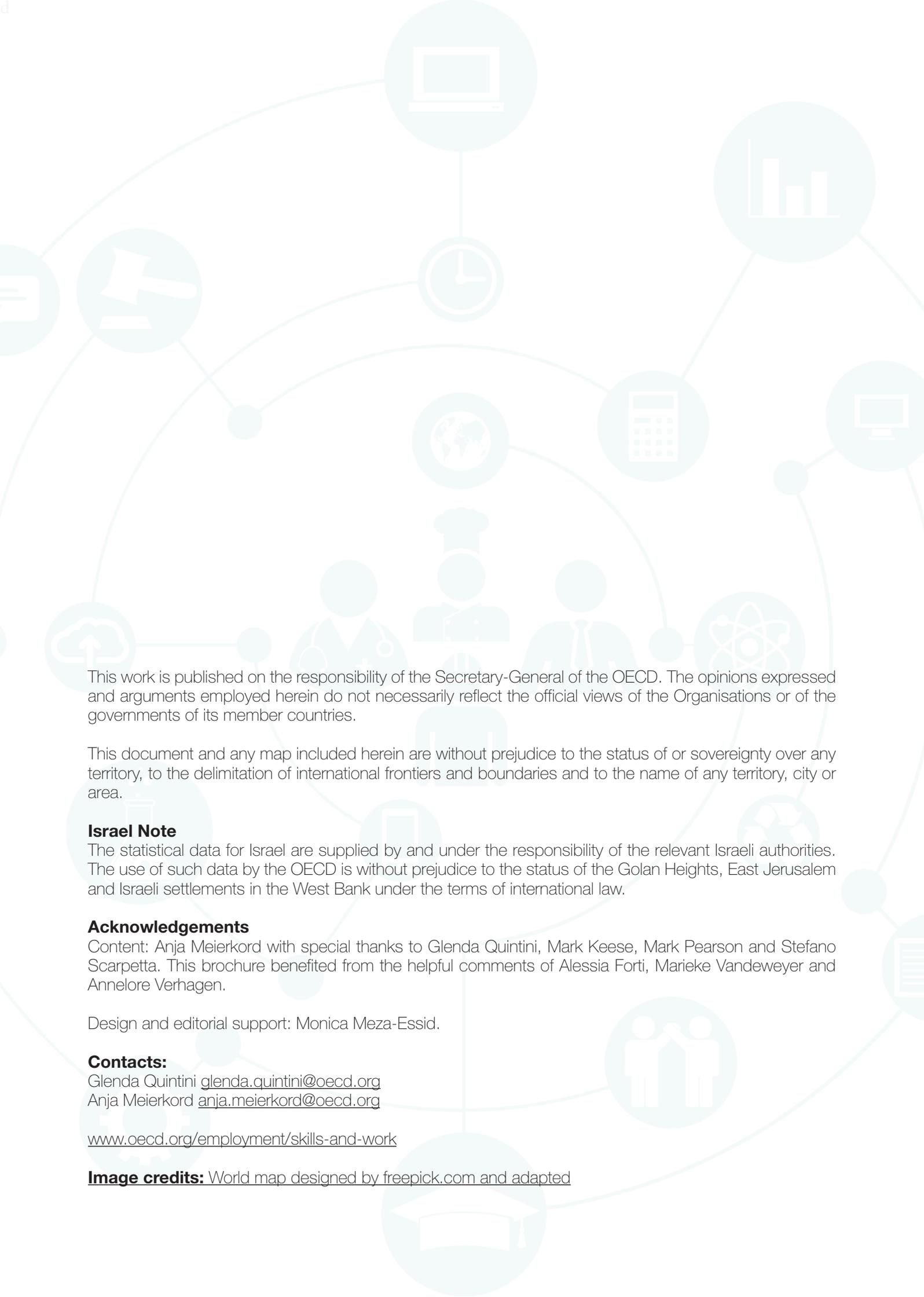
### Three key insights from existing practice:

- ⇒ *Provide targeted financial incentives for low-skilled adults, which steer their training choices towards skills in demand.*
- ⇒ *Consider all costs of training participation when designing financial incentives, including direct course costs, indirect costs and opportunity costs, i.e. foregone earnings or benefits.*
- ⇒ *Set-up mechanisms to inform adults about the financial support available.*



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