

BRIEFING NOTE

Return to learning, return to work

Helping low-qualified adults out of unemployment

Since 2008, the question uppermost in policy-makers' minds has understandably been the explosive growth of youth unemployment. But the crisis has also severely affected low-qualified adults, who face the highest rate of unemployment across Europe ⁽¹⁾. A recent Cedefop study confirms that work-based training programmes can address the particular needs of this group, provided programmes are properly targeted and designed.

For Europe to reduce poverty and achieve its employment target of 75%, all countries must help people update, upgrade or complement their skills.

Within the yearly cycle of policy coordination known as the European semester, which coordinates progress towards the goals of Europe 2020 strategy, several countries have received recommendations to devise measures that address challenges facing the long-term unemployed and low-qualified workers. These include Denmark ('take further steps to improve the employability of people at the margins of the labour market, including people with a migrant background, the long-term unemployed and low-skilled workers'), Estonia ('strengthen activation measures to facilitate the return to the labour market of the long-term unemployed'), and Spain ('reinforce the effectiveness of reskilling training programmes for older and low-skilled workers') ⁽²⁾.

An issue affecting all of Europe

Low-qualified adults, defined as people aged 25 to 64 with at most lower secondary education, have experienced a greater rise in unemployment since 2008 than any other skill group. Though they represent a declining share of the workforce, in absolute numbers they are a considerable group, currently standing at 70.7 million ⁽³⁾. The graph shows the unemployment rate of economically active low-qualified adults, and all adults, in 2012.

Low-qualified adults face special challenges

- As Cedefop's work on skills has shown, most jobs – including those qualified as elementary – require increasingly higher skills or more complex skills sets.
- Adults with low qualifications are the least likely to take up further education or training ⁽⁴⁾. In 2012, 3.9% of all low-qualified adults participated in lifelong learning compared to an average of 9% (for medium-qualified adults the proportion rose to 7.7%; for tertiary-level graduates, it was 16%) ⁽⁵⁾.
- Low-qualified adults frequently lack not just job-specific skills, but also key competences that apply across most jobs ⁽⁶⁾. These include numeracy and literacy, computer skills, communication skills, but also attitudes towards work and workplace conduct.

⁽¹⁾ Council of the European Union (2013). *Joint employment report*. Brussels, 4.3.2013. p. 9. [accessed 17.9.2013].

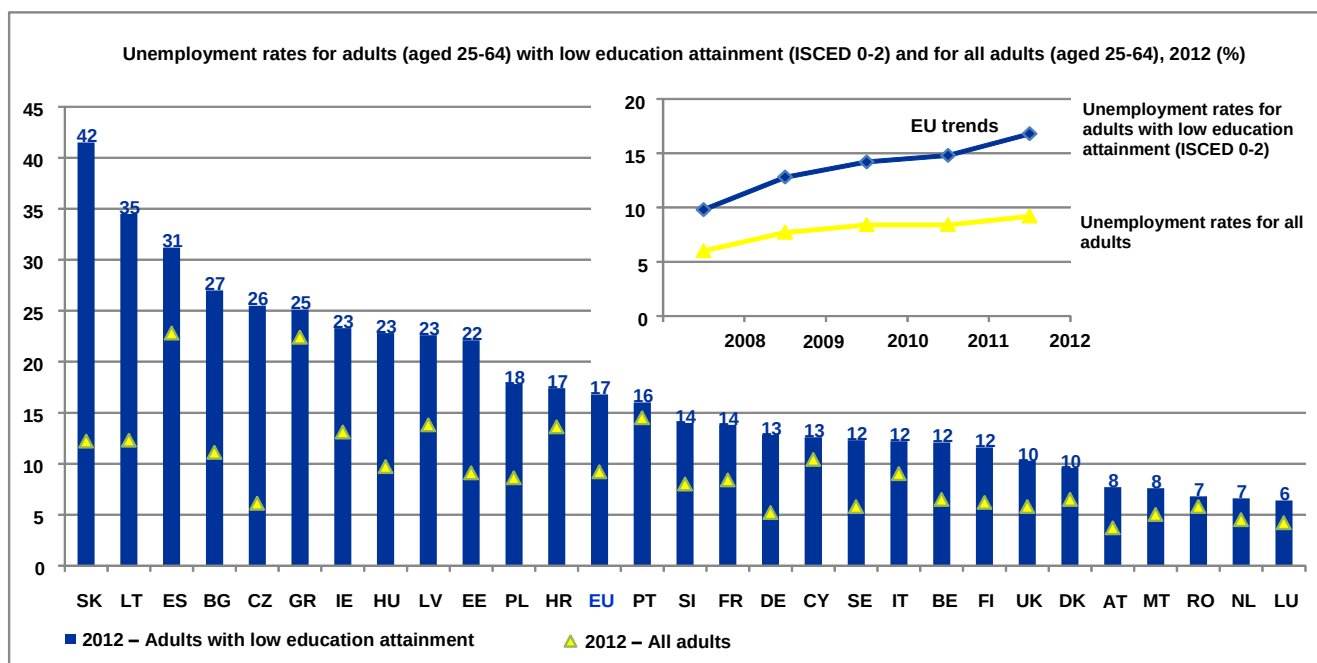
⁽²⁾ European Commission (2013). *Country-specific recommendations 2013* [online]. [accessed 17.9.2013].

⁽³⁾ Eurostat (2013). *EU labour force survey* (date of extraction 15.7.2013).

⁽⁴⁾ Cedefop (2011). *Learning while working: how skills development can be supported through workplace learning* [online]. [accessed 17.9.2013].

⁽⁵⁾ Cedefop (2012). *Lifelong learning for adults with a low level of education: any recent progress?* [online]. Data to 2011. [accessed 17.9.2013].

⁽⁶⁾ Europa (2011). *Key competences for lifelong learning* [online]. [accessed 17.9.2013].



Source: Eurostat, 2013.

- Recruitment bias: employers often associate formal qualifications with readiness for work. In conditions of high unemployment, they may therefore prefer to hire formally overqualified candidates, making the job market even less hospitable to the low-qualified ⁽⁷⁾.
- Information gaps: low-qualified adults often find it difficult to get information about available jobs, not least because employers invest less time and money sourcing such employees. This structural problem is not adequately addressed by public employment services (PES), which are used by about 50% of the unemployed; in most countries, people with high levels of education are considerably less likely to consult PES.
- Learning style: by definition, low-qualified adults have left school early. Some have availed themselves of a high availability of jobs in their region; others may have had negative experience of schooling. To most, however, it is typically difficult to take up school training in later life.

- Labour market pressure: in the present economic crisis, the low-qualified face increasing competition for both jobs and training opportunities from more qualified unemployed people ⁽⁸⁾.

Work-based learning: what it is and how it can help

Work-based learning programmes are based either in the workplace itself or a simulated work environment within a training programme. They may combine learning in a training institution with learning in a company through work placements. For those specifically addressed to low-qualified adults, several factors contribute to success:

- they provide a thorough initial assessment of participants' work-readiness (workplace conduct and learning needs) including validation of prior learning, and offer continuing guidance. Making people's knowledge, skills and competences visible can raise their self-esteem and provide them with an incentive for further learning;

⁽⁷⁾ Cedefop (2010). *The skill matching challenge: analysing skill mismatch and policy implications*. Luxembourg: Publications Office, p. 49.

⁽⁸⁾ Cedefop (2013, forthcoming): *Return to work: work-based learning and the reintegration of unemployed adults into the labour market*.

- they represent a more congenial learning environment for people who have left school early and may not be comfortable returning to a classroom;
- they offer individual training plans, tailoring learning to each person's profile and needs;
- they focus both on key competences critical for employment and on job-specific knowledge. Gaining workplace experience also means that people grow into workplace behaviour and norms, which are of particular importance to employers;
- they establish relations of trust between education and training institutions and employers, which operate in the learner's favour;

The integration workshops and worksites (*ateliers et chantiers d'insertion*) strand of the French 'integration through work' (*insertion par l'économie*) provides insights into how work tasks can be used to develop key competences. Mowing a lawn is treated as a way to improve mathematical skills, when, for instance, calculating surface area and mixing fuels in the appropriate percentage.

- their close links with a workplace ensure a gradual transition from training to work: participants gain access to potential employers, to whom they can demonstrate their abilities;
- they help people develop practical job-seeking skills (interviews, CVs, etc.) and can provide further practical help for the job search itself;
- they provide support for practical issues such as childcare;
- finally, they certify achievements: job-seekers can prove that they have acquired new skills.

Considerations for policy-makers

Work-based learning can help alleviate problems faced by low-qualified unemployed adults, mainly thanks to the holistic approach the best of these programmes apply. By further developing or encouraging such programmes, policy-makers can address some of the disadvantages the low-qualified face on the labour market.

At present, only some programmes that systematically develop key competences are available for adult job-seekers. Examples include integration workshops and worksites in France; in Germany, 'measures for activation and re-integration into labour'; and in Denmark, Danish vocational basic education for adults.

To overcome recruitment bias, programmes should recognise prior learning and accredit results achieved; adult job-seekers typically find it difficult to provide evidence of skills acquired through work experience ⁽⁹⁾. Certificates and qualifications that result from work-based learning should also be fully integrated into each country's national qualifications framework – at the very least as non-formally acquired qualifications. In this way, people completing such programmes will also be able to acquire full occupational qualifications at a later stage, or progress further in training. The ability of work-based programmes to give participants a fighting chance in a tight employment market thus depends partly on their offering formal recognition of the skills they impart.

Addressed primarily to the low-qualified unemployed, Sweden's Yrkevux programme validates participants' previously acquired knowledge and skills, and on completion awards them a full vocational qualification. Similarly, the Dutch Labour Training Centre ensures that those who lack a diploma can get a minimum vocational certification and Dutch language certification.

⁽⁹⁾ Cedefop (2011). *Working and ageing: guidance and counselling for mature learners*. Luxembourg: Publications Office, p. 138. [accessed 17.9.2013].

Practical barriers to learning are best tackled in the training programme itself. This means programmes should also address other issues faced by unemployed adults, such as travel arrangements, health and childcare, as do Hungary's springboard programme and the French ACI.

PES should also pay closer attention to low-qualified workers and steer them to work-based programmes that best correspond to their needs. Within these services, guidance programmes should also address specific needs of low-qualified adults⁽¹⁰⁾. The integrative role of guidance is in fact of critical importance for PES to identify correctly the needs and abilities of low-qualified people and direct them towards the best training options.

To steer and finance these options, cooperation and active involvement of companies, unions and training providers is necessary; it should therefore be reflected in a formal structure which can coordinate better supply and demand for job placements. These bodies could share the investment necessary for such programmes, and help to promote them among employers, education and training institutions and low-skilled unemployed adults. Employers, particularly, should be made aware of the benefits of such programmes to encourage them to contribute to them – particularly those in emerging sectors or who face a skills gap.

Further information and services

- Cedefop's forthcoming report *Return to work: work-based learning and the reintegration of unemployed adults into the labour market* analyses success factors for vocational programmes using work-based learning and targeting key competence development, and suggests ways of using the full potential of such programmes.
- A full bibliography on this and related issues is available from our online information services: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Information-services/bibliographies.aspx>.
- The adult learning webpage on Cedefop's portal provides further information on the agency's work in this field: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/adult-training/index.aspx>.

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⁽¹⁰⁾ European Commission (2013). *European agenda for adult learning and recent policy developments* [online]. [accessed 17.9.2013].