

Education

## Lifelong learning



## Key points

- As of 2019, slightly more women (12%) than men (10%) participated in adult education in the member States of the European Union, only slightly higher than the corresponding figures for 2010.
- Adults with already high levels of education participated in adult learning at a higher rate than those with lower educational attainment.
- Gender gaps in participation rates were significant in the group with tertiary education, while at lower levels of educational attainment the gender gap was smaller or insignificant.
- Employed people are more likely to participate in adult education and training than unemployed people or those who are economically inactive.

## Background

Adult education is a core component of lifelong learning. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines adult education as education specifically targeting adults to improve their technical or professional qualifications, further develop their abilities or enrich their knowledge, with the purpose of completing a level of formal education, acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies in a new field or refreshing or updating their knowledge in a particular field.<sup>1</sup>

Adult learning comprises all forms of education and learning that aim to ensure that adults continue to participate in their societies and the world of work. Adult learning is crucial in maintaining good health, remaining active in the community and staying active in all aspects of society, as well as for improving and developing skills, adapting to technical developments, advancing careers or returning to the labour market.<sup>2</sup> Adult education programmes are extremely diverse<sup>3</sup> and differ in terms of objectives, focus, target groups, content, pedagogy and scale. In more developed countries, adult education tends to be more focused on the enhancement of skills, while in the less developed countries the emphasis is more on literacy programmes and the completion of basic education. Moreover, providers of adult education programmes are also diverse, including governments, non-governmental organizations, local communities and employers.

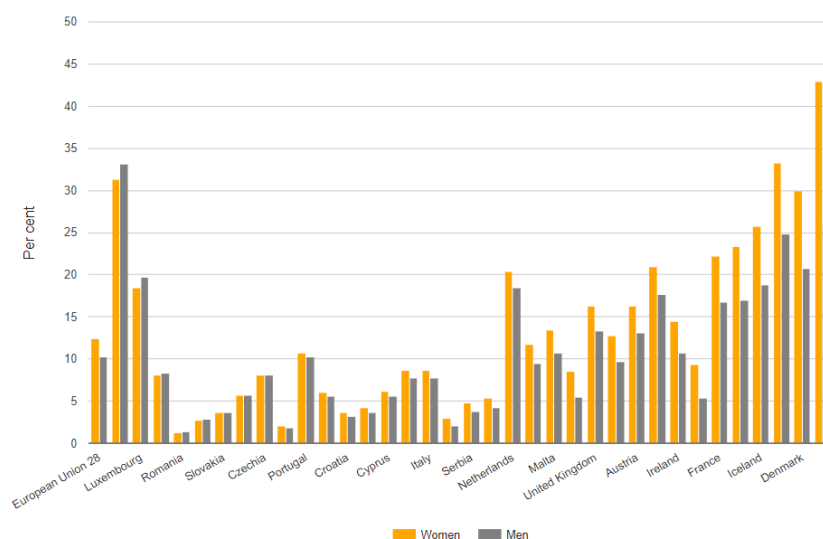
The indicator on adult participation in learning contributes to the monitoring of progress towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which seeks to ensure that people have access to inclusive and equitable quality education through all stages of life. In addition to promoting formal qualifications, SDG 4 also aims to increase the number of youths and adults with relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

## Current situation

### Slightly more women than men participate in adult education in member States of the European Union

Data for the 28 countries that took part in the 2019 European Union Labour Force Survey show that the average participation rate in adult education among people aged 25–64, regardless of the respondent's level of education and labour force status, stood at 12% for women and 10% for men in 2019 (see figure I). Those figures were only slightly higher than the corresponding figures for 2010. Participation in adult education and training varied considerably across countries. Sweden had the highest participation rate (43% of women and 26% of men), while in Romania only about 1% of women and men were engaged in adult education. In most countries, women were more likely to participate in learning activities than men, with the exception of Germany, Luxembourg, North Macedonia, Romania and Switzerland, although the sex differential in participation rates in those countries was small.

**Figure I:** Rates of participation in adult education and training in member States of the European Union by sex: 2019 (Percentage)



Source: Eurostat database, 2020 (accessed on 5 June 2020) (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>).

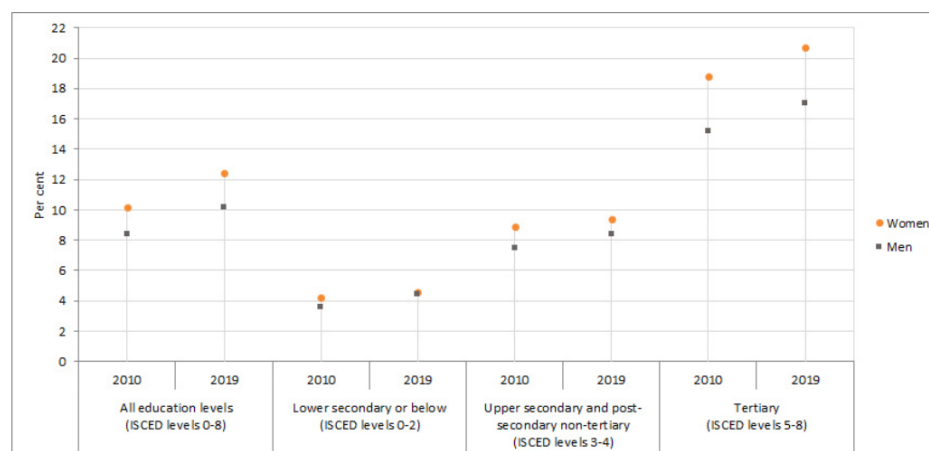
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## Adults with high levels of education participate in adult learning at a higher rate than those with lower levels of educational attainment: the gender gap is largest at the highest levels of educational attainment

Data on participation in adult education according to educational attainment indicate that adults with already high levels of education participate at a higher rate, while those with lower levels participate at a lower rate (see figure II): 21% of adult women and 17% of adult men who had completed tertiary education participated in lifelong learning in 2019, while among those who had a medium level of qualification as their highest educational attainment (upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary) the rate was 9% for women and 8% for men. For those who had attained lower secondary level at most, the participation rate was below 5% for both women and men. There are a number of reasons for this situation, including, in particular, that the demand for training might be higher among individuals with higher levels of education because they already have the skills that facilitate learning and are more likely to be in jobs that demand ongoing training. Regardless of the educational level, in most countries, women's participation rates were higher than those of men. Gaps between women's and men's participation rates were significant among individuals with tertiary education. At lower educational attainment levels, gaps in participation in adult education between women and men were smaller or insignificant.

**Figure II:** Rates of participation in adult education and training in member States of the European Union by sex and level of educational attainment: 2010 and 2019



**Source:** Eurostat database, 2020 (accessed on 5 June 2020) (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>).

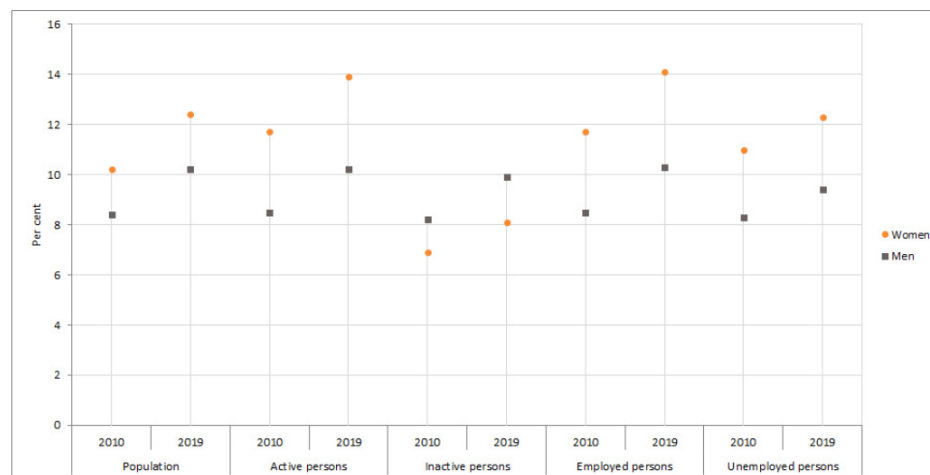
**Note:** Educational levels are presented as classified in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The annual European Union Labour Force Survey collects statistics on lifelong learning for the population aged 25–64. The reference period for participation is four weeks prior to the 2019 survey (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey>).

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## Employed people are more likely to participate in adult education than those who are unemployed or economically inactive

Data on labour status also show disparities: employed people are more likely to participate in adult education and training than those who are unemployed or economically inactive (see figure III). Participation rates for employed people in 2019 were 14% for women and 10% for men, compared with 12% for women and 9% for men among unemployed people and 8% for women and 10% for men among those who were economically inactive.

**Figure III:** Rates of participation in adult education and training in member States of the European Union by sex and labour status: 2010 and 2019



Source: Eurostat database, 2020 (accessed on 5 June 2020) (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>).

Note: The annual European Union Labour Force Survey collects statistics on lifelong learning for the population aged 25–64. The reference period for participation is four weeks prior to the 2019 survey (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey>).

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## Sources

- United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, UNESCO Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education 2015, France, 2016 .
- UNESCO, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, UIS glossary (accessed in May 2020) .
- UNESCO et al., Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4, Paris, 2016 .



## About the data

### Definition

- Adult participation in learning: **Indicator that measures the share of the population aged 25–64 who received formal or non-formal education and training in the four weeks preceding the 2019 European Union Labour Force Survey.**<sup>4</sup> Adult learning covers both general and vocational formal and non-formal learning activities. Adult learning refers to learning activities that take place after the end of initial (or full-time) education.

### Coverage

Women and men aged 25–64.

### Availability

Data availability on lifelong learning, including adult education, is limited due to large variations in adult learning programmes and the lack of a common understanding about which categories of learning activities should be included. Data presented correspond to the 28 member States of the European Union that took part in the European Union Labour Force Survey in 2019.<sup>5</sup>





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## Footnotes

1. [United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\), UNESCO Institute for Statistics, UIS glossary](#). (accessed in May 2020)
2. Eurostat metadata for adult participation in learning.
3. Adult education may encompass formal and non-formal education and training, including: continuing education; recurrent education; equivalency or second chance education; professional development; literacy and post-literacy programmes; adult basic education; information and communication technologies (ICT) training; religious, cultural and political education; technical, vocational and entrepreneurship education and training; income-generation programmes; and other programmes focusing on life skills, livelihoods and community development.
4. The annual [European Union Labour Force Survey](#) provides results for the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator on lifelong learning (defined as the participation of people aged 25–64 in education and training), which is used for regular policy monitoring in the European Union. The reference period for participation in education and training is the four weeks prior to the 2019 survey.
5. Ibid.

