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# Methodological Aspects of Surveys on Participation in Adult Education and Learning<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** The paper discusses methodological issues and problems related to the current ways of measuring participation in adult education in Europe. This paper presents the most common ways of measuring participation, in particular methodological approach EUROSTAT, the Statistical Office of the European Union, its methodological and statistical model AES (Studies on the participation of adults), as well as some national and international models. A critical analysis of methodological aspects is directed to: concepts and definitions of adult education and learning that implicitly or explicitly underlying the ways of measuring participation, in the manner of determining the population and sample, defining the time frame that includes measurements, questionnaires, indicators and benchmarks. In addition, recommendations are given that could improve measuring of participation, in order to collect accurate and reliable data, which can be comparable internationally, and enable better monitoring and evaluation of participation in adult education.

**Key words:** participation, adult education, methodology, EUROSTAT, the European Union.

## Need and importance

Research on adult education and learning traditionally includes participation rates as one of the most significant topics. It has importance per se, giving use-

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ful information for both policy makers and practitioners, but it is also a baseline datum that provides a framework for the discussions on motivation of adults, barriers for learning, access to education and many others.

On the other hand data on participation are those that are most compared, between countries, but also within one country during different periods. They are often a starting point for international discussions, and an important object for the monitoring of progress at national and international level.

While it is important and necessary to collect reliable and precise data on participation, there is also a flexible, “fluid” nature of adult education and learning, encompassing various contents and forms, which make these data difficult to find, and capture and express in a precise quantitative form.

For these reasons it is necessary to focus on data on participation and on the methodology used.

### Framework and approaches

Pure collection of statistical data is usually restricted to demographic aspects and quantitative data. More in-depth surveys also analyse further aspects, determinants and elements of participation.

There are two main approaches in research on participation. One concentrates on actual participation by identifying participation rates of the whole population or specific groups or by collecting data on participation in specific programmes and offers. The other relates to research into the factors of promotion of or barriers to participation in adult learning. (Keogh, 2009). Aspects related to participation usually examined in surveys are:

- The overall rate of participation, as the focal point of research and most widely examined aspect; further accompanying data are those dealing with the participation rate within single subcategories, such as: gender, age, profession, educational level, ethnic groups, rural and urban population, specific subregions etc;
- Participation in formal, non-formal and informal education, although the participation in formal education is far more analysed than the later two;
- Participation by different fields of education and learning: initial education, literacy courses, vocational education etc.; vocational and job-related education tend to have the priority;

- Motivation of adult learners for participation in education and learning, but also the barriers and obstacles to participate, where they may be found (examining external factors – context and settings, and internal factors – related to the learners itself). This is traditionally one of the most studied aspects of participation;
- Some other, specific issues such as: type of learning activities, type of provider, the source of financial support and costs of participation, volume of instruction hours, dominant and preferred organizational forms of teaching and instruction and others. In Finland, for example, data on specific, additional topics, such as information technology or foreign language skills and diverse everyday learning environments have also been collected on each survey round.

### Methodologies used

Almost every European country has some kind of data relating to participation in adult education and learning, but just a few of them use developed methodological approaches already for years (Finland, UK, Germany...). With the development of European Community policies, common reliable and objective statistics became more important and fostered attempts to provide the European Union with statistics at European level that enable comparisons between countries and regions. EUROSTAT - Statistical Office of the European Communities - offers a whole range of important and interesting data on many sectors including education. More and more countries use the EUROSTAT methodology in surveys on participation in adult educational and learning.

The Adult Education Survey (AES) is part of the EU Statistics on lifelong learning. The surveys have been carried out by countries in the EU, EFTA and candidate countries between 2005 and 2008. The EU AES was a pilot exercise which for the first time proposed a common EU framework including a standard questionnaire, tools and quality reporting. The survey covers participation in education and lifelong learning activities (formal, non-formal and informal learning) including job-related activities, characteristics of learning activities, self-reported skills as well as modules on social and cultural participation, foreign language skills, IT skills and background variables related to main characteristics of the respondents. The target population are all persons in private households aged 25-64. Existing sources of data on lifelong learning include the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Continuous Vocational Training Survey (enterprise survey).

The reference period was 12 months, but the survey period varies depending on the country and whether AES was conducted alone or as part of another survey.

National surveys show a great variety, but over the past years there is a growing tendency to accommodate European comparisons and the countries adopt more of the common methodology. Many countries used the LFS approach, where participation is measured over the 4 weeks preceding the survey; the others encompass both 1-year and 4-week periods. EU averages and benchmarks are drawn from the data obtained for the 4-week period prior to the survey.<sup>3</sup>

In 2005 the EUROSTAT Task Force on Adult Education Survey analysed Adult Education National Surveys in the following countries: Sweden, Finland, UK, Italy, France, Germany, Estonia, Switzerland and Canada – the concepts, terminology, methods, indicators etc. The ‘survey on surveys’ provides concrete information on methods of data collection in the countries organizing national AES with consequent recommendations for more common and comparable approaches. Based on that, they recommended focusing on the working age population, i.e. 25-64 year-olds, to use a stratified sample of individuals, at least according to age and gender, and to use face-to-face interviews (Task force report on adult education survey, 2005).

EUROSTAT data collection is still the one that is most used, compared and quoted widely.<sup>4</sup>

The US National Center for Education Statistics regularly conducts National Household Education Survey Programs (NHES), and as part of it: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning Survey, on persons 14 or 16 years or older, who were not enrolled full-time in elementary or secondary school. The NHES is a telephone survey of the non-institutionalized civilian population, using random digit dealing (RDD) methods. Data are collected using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) procedures, and respondents report on adult education activities in the previous 12 months.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) included the Adult Education Participation Survey (AEPS) – the first one was conducted in 1995, in the ‘civilian, non-institutionalized population’ and on a representative sample of adults aged 16-65 in several countries. ‘However, no uniform sampling methodology was imposed because of the differences in data sources, survey practices and resources available in the countries (Belanger, Valdivielso, eds, 1997). Still, the countries were asked to respect a number of key features. The reviews showed some shortcomings because of the differences in test administration between

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<sup>3</sup> EUROSTAT data on participation (2009). Retrieved 24.02. 2009. from <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tsiem080&plugin=0>.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: *Lline – Lifelong Learning in Europe* (2009), No. 2.

countries (such as different methods in weighting samples) and low respond rate, but still, valid conclusions could be drawn.

### **Methodological problems**

The measurement of participation in adult education and learning activities raises a number of conceptual and methodological challenges. The ways in which a given research study defines adult education and learning and the methods used to collect information about the volume and type of educational activities may have a serious impact on the surveyed rates of participation. Even among the countries working intensively on the harmonisation of the methods for surveys on participation (mostly countries of West and North Europe) there are still differences and national specifics that make the data not completely comparable. When it comes to the new EU countries or to the countries still outside the EU, the differences in methodology seem to be so divergent and incompatible that any comparison is pointless.

There are several main issues related to methodology that might lead to very different results and thus be disputable:

### **Concepts and definitions**

Almost all surveys in EU and non-EU countries have a broad definition of adult education and learning as the starting point. Formal, non-formal and informal learning are usually part of it, sometimes specified as “taught and self-directed learning.” In reality the questions hardly cover informal learning, and they cover non-formal learning only to a very limited extent. Even if such questions exist, it is necessary to examine exactly the formulations and to pay special attention to the way research subjects understand them. In many countries the traditional understanding of learning and education includes just formal types and school-like education, so less structured learning events, learning activities at home and in leisure time are often not recognized as worth mentioning, and thus they are not captured in a survey (Miteva, Popovic, Medic, 2009).

The Nordic countries (and the UK), with their long tradition of adult education, have a high percentage of participation (all of them more than 50%). Not only that, they recognize and value all types of learning, and this fact is expressed in the high data on participation. Adult learning activities cover a wide spectrum, and it should be attempted to capture as many of them as possible.

„The lowest rate, under 20 %, is found in the East European countries freed from the Soviet system and the Mediterranean countries freed from dictatorship” (Antikainen, 2009). On the other hand, a recent study by the Bulgarian Institute for Statistics<sup>5</sup> gives evidence of the methodological challenge referred to above: the percentage of participation in adult education in Bulgaria, usually estimated at around 1.3%, increased rapidly when the new terminology was used and explained, stating clearly that non-formal and informal learning should be included.

This might be the case with some other countries of Central and South Eastern Europe, too, where there was a boom in new types of educational activities in the period after the political changes that are still not reflected in the surveys.

Further on, the Task Force recommendation on including participation in cultural activities (including reading books and similar) has special importance for countries where adult education has been closely linked to culture and art.

### Sample method

Adult participation in learning is almost exclusively examined in surveys of a representative sample.

A combination with other samples could be considered, especially in countries where there are not many traditional forms of adult learning, but where new forms, types and approaches have emerged. Providers could also be considered, since they are often not recognized as adult education providers, sometimes formally belonging to other sectors. Learning activities as a part of a project (such as European projects, e.g. CARDS, Phare, tender based projects) are becoming more important. The data collected by state statistical agencies could provide samples on learning activities in small and medium enterprises, companies, state institutions, which could complement or correct the results obtained from the individual learner samples.

The sample size might be of significant importance. Larger samples make it possible to analyse sub-groups in depth, but they increase the cost of a survey dramatically. Still, a minimum sample size should be defined in the terms of percentage of population.

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<sup>5</sup> Национален статистически институт (2009). Retrieved 24.02. 2009. from <http://www.nsi.bg/index.php>.

## Population

One of the main weaknesses of the LFS is the fact that it is very much labour force oriented. A substantial portion of the population is not taken into consideration. In countries with high unemployment rates and a high number of rural residents, it might even be extremely high. A survey should therefore cover the population as a whole and not concentrate on the labour force only.

The issue of age is also an important one. In the existing surveys several lower age limits are used, mostly 25 years of age as minimum and 64 years as upper age limit. The national surveys usually try to exclude persons in initial education. This is inconvenient especially in the countries where programmes in literacy and basic education of adults are prevailing, because they often include 14- or 15-year olds, who are not included in the regular school system any more (and are treated as adults). The (non)participation in this type of education is often the cause for later (non)participation in other forms of adult learning activities, and therefore needs to be captured (together with the relevant data on motivation and barriers).

In the participation survey in Finland the upper age limit of the population has sometimes been raised; for example up to 79 in the 2000 survey.<sup>6</sup> The survey on participation undertaken for NIACE by RSGB in 2009, interviewed a weighted sample of 4,917 adults, aged 17 and over.<sup>7</sup>

The upper age limit is important in countries with an 'aging population', where there are more and more activities for seniors. To limit the survey population at 64 completely excludes this important group.

Many countries hope to distinguish the non-learners from the learners through the questions about participation in learning (Kuwana, Larsson, 2008). Considering the dynamic nature of learning within the life span of a person, the permeable boundaries between formal, non-formal and informal learning (and the growing tendency to recognition of prior learning), intentional and non-intentional learning, it remains unclear if this goal is achievable. Even if it is achievable at a given moment, its unstable nature makes this difference useless.

The classifications used in surveys differ to some extent – not just "standard-categories" such as age and sex, but also level of education, employment status, socio-economic group, region, municipality group. These categories are differently defined in single countries, and different understanding and criteria are used. Countries like Finland have very clear description of "metadata, concepts

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<sup>6</sup> Tilastokeskus. Retrieved 24.02. 2009. from [http://www.stat.fi/meta/til/aku\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/meta/til/aku_en.html)

<sup>7</sup> NIACE. Retrieved 24.02. 2009. from <http://www.niace.org.uk/narrowing-participation-for-adults>

and definition” of every single category, including the type of data and sources.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the category of ”class” (upper and middle socioeconomic groups, working class, white collar workers, skilled working-class people) was included into UK-wide survey on adult participation in education and learning as a very important one.<sup>9</sup> A German survey in 2007 on participation in further education gives the detailed description of the type/form of learning activities covered by the survey.<sup>10</sup>

### Time coverage

One of the most important questions, even for the countries that have been taking part in participation surveys for a long time, remains the time coverage. The LFS period of ‘four weeks prior to the survey’ (time-limited snapshot, based on reports from employers rather than workers) is questionable for two reasons: adult learning might have a seasonal character in some regions or countries; it also depends on a wide variety of personal factors of learners. From this point of view, the recommended period of one year seems to be more appropriate. Still, the argument remains that persons might forget educational activities over this time (especially informal learning). There is also the question whether the past 12 months from the time of the interview should be counted or the calendar year. NIACE has used several categories in various projects that tackled, among other aspects, participation in adult learning: those who are currently learning, those who were engaged in learning activity during last three years, and those participating in current or recent learning.<sup>11</sup> The German survey on participation from 2007 includes three categories: “any participation”, “participation in last 12 months” and “participation in last three years”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tilastokeskus. Retrieved 24.02. 2009. from [http://www.stat.fi/meta/kas/index\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/meta/kas/index_en.html)

<sup>9</sup> National Literacy Trust. Retrieved 03.03. 2009. <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/socialinclusion/adults/divide.html>

<sup>10</sup> Weiterbildungsbeteiligung in Deutschland – Eckdaten zum BSW-AES 2007 (2007). Retrieved 15.03. 2009. from [http://www.bmbf.de/pot/download.php/M:12182+Weiterbildungsbeteiligung+in+Deutschland/-/pub/weiterbildungsbeteiligung\\_in\\_deutschland.pdf](http://www.bmbf.de/pot/download.php/M:12182+Weiterbildungsbeteiligung+in+Deutschland/-/pub/weiterbildungsbeteiligung_in_deutschland.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> NIACE. Retrieved 03.03. 2009 from [http://archive.niace.org.uk/information/Briefng\\_sheets/Who\\_Learns\\_2001.pdf](http://archive.niace.org.uk/information/Briefng_sheets/Who_Learns_2001.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Weiterbildungsbeteiligung in Deutschland – Eckdaten zum BSW-AES 2007 (2007). Retrieved 15.03. 2009. from [http://www.bmbf.de/pot/download.php/M:12182+Weiterbildungsbeteiligung+in+Deutschland/-/pub/weiterbildungsbeteiligung\\_in\\_deutschland.pdf](http://www.bmbf.de/pot/download.php/M:12182+Weiterbildungsbeteiligung+in+Deutschland/-/pub/weiterbildungsbeteiligung_in_deutschland.pdf)



## Questionnaires and indicators

Bearing in mind the composition of a sample and the different groups that should be included (education, age...), the question should be carefully formulated and research very well targeted, especially for the communication with the population with lower levels of education or with a more traditional view on education and learning. Another important issue is how to avoid questions that lead to 'socially acceptable' answers. The national context should therefore be carefully examined and considered before the survey.

This is important for another reason: telephone-based or computer-supported interviews might exclude whole groups of persons from the sample. Face-to-face interviews are therefore better (in Finland, for example, the data from the survey are based on face-to-face interviewing of a sample of approximately 5,000 people and in 2006 the survey comprised approximately 6,800 persons), but time-consuming, with a risk that the sample will be too small in countries with large populations.

The need to obtain comparable data and the need to adapt survey questions to national circumstances still challenges the common understanding of adult learning and education among European countries. This concerns the issue of providers that could be listed in the questionnaire, and then the selection of learning activities (all of them, just the recent ones, the longest ones, the most important ones, random chosen...), as well as the number of questions (that vary from country to country).

This leads to the question of indicators, which should remain comparable even after they have been translated and adapted to the individual national situations. An example of a methodological difficulty might be the volume of learning activities, expressed as a number of hours spent in learning during the reference period. It is almost impossible to obtain the total number, so the indicator could cover hours just in formal, or both in formal and non-formal learning, or, as is most usual, just in vocational education and training. The time needed for self-studies in a learning activity is usually not collected in the surveys. A few countries use the form of time span or categories when they collect information about time spent in learning during the reference period. In this case it will not be possible to estimate the total time spent in learning during the reference period.

Even the simple key socio-demographic indicators (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, disability, educational background and employment circumstances) could be a subject of agreement for common indicators.

## Benchmarks

Benchmarks have a crucial importance not just for European comparison, but also for the individual countries, enabling them to monitor their progress in the field of participation in adult education and learning.

Considering the big discrepancies in the participation rate in Europe, it could be questioned if the common benchmark for this field is possible. Some countries are far above the 12.5%, for the others it seems to be an unreachable goal. A further increase in this percentage might even discourage those countries. On the other hand, the new European benchmark in participation of 15% is certainly needed if the Lisbon and post-Lisbon goals are to be achieved.

Setting this new benchmark should be accompanied by measures to improve the methodology of participation surveys, and the collection of new, accurate and comparable data, especially in the new EU countries and candidate countries. The best way to develop methodology for obtaining such data is cooperation of national governments and their agencies with related European organizations. Common efforts should focus on how to define a methodological approach suitable for all countries, expandable for aspects relevant for individual countries. This way, the huge discrepancies among the countries would decrease, and more precise and comparable data would help all the countries to get a clear idea of achievements, potentials and gaps, thus paving the common way to an increase in participation in adult learning and education in Europe.

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## Metodološki aspekti istraživanja participacije odraslih u učenju i obrazovanju<sup>14</sup>

**Apstrakt:** U radu se razmatraju metodološka pitanja i problemi u vezi sa aktuelnim načinima merenja participacije u obrazovanju i učenju odraslih u Evropi. Prikazani su najčešći načini merenja participacije, naročito metodološki pristup Eurostata, Statističkog biroa Evropske unije, njegov metodološko-statistički model AES (Studije o participaciji odraslih), kao i pojedini nacionalni i međunarodni modeli. Kritička analiza metodoloških aspekata usmerena je na: koncepte i definicije obrazovanja i učenja odraslih koje implicitno ili eksplicitno stoje iza načina merenja participacije, na način određivanja populacije i uzorka, definisanje vremenskog okvira koji ? merenjem obuhvata, upitnike, indikatore i *benchmarks*. Uz pojedine aspekte daju se i preporuke kojima se može unaprediti merenje participacije, a u cilju prikupljanja preciznih i pouzdanih podataka koji bi bili uporedivi u međunarodnim okvirima i omogućili bolje praćenje i evaluaciju participacije u obrazovanju i učenju odraslih.

**Ključne reči:** participacija, obrazovanje odraslih, metodologija, Eurostat, Evropska unija.

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