

**BRIEFING PAPER 6, issued 2009
LLL2010 SUBPROJECT 4**

Beyond statistical definition: Broadening the understanding of formal adult education.

Context of the research

In the European Union in 2003, 6.6 Million adults over 25 participated in formal adult education while in employment. Employed adults comprise over half of all participants in formal adult education. While participation rates seem low compared to non-formal adult education, over 30 percent of all course hours reported are in formal adult education.

European statistics have little difficulty defining and counting formal adult education – in contrast to non-formal education and training and informal learning. ‘Formal education is defined as education provided in the system of schools, colleges, universities and other formal educational institutions that normally constitutes a continuous ‘ladder’ of full-time education for children and young people, generally beginning at the age of five to seven and continuing to up to 20 or 25 years old.’ However, while it is easy to demonstrate the numerical significance of formal adult education, the social realities behind the numbers are more difficult to interpret.

Key issues

The aim of subproject 4 is to understand how managers and employees of SMEs assess and make use of formal adult education as a type of education distinct from the more frequent types of company training and continuing education. For investigating the particularities of formal adult education, it is necessary to develop

1. an understanding of how formal adult education differ form a) initial education b) non-formal adult education programmes c) short courses which are typically the backbone of enterprises’ training activities d) other ways used by enterprises to support learning efficiently
2. a concept of the dimensions shaping the social reality of formal adult education in a society. Clearly, as societal frameworks differ, so the social realities behind educational opportunities which counts as formal adult education in the various countries.

Initial Results

For understanding enterprises’ and individuals’ preferences for or reservation towards formal adult education, ideal types of formal adult education programmes and participants in formal adult education were constructed (compare table 1).

Table 1 – Ideal type of formal adult education programmes and participants in formal adult education

formal adult education programmes	participants in formal adult education
a) are of substantial length (several months to several years) involving a substantial number of learning units and related tasks	h) have irrevocably terminated initial education
b) provide potentially one step upward on the educational ladder, in regards to an existing hierarchy of qualifications	i) engage in a clearly defined period of highly intensified engagement in learning activities forming a life event (not a continuous process) dividing time in before/after)
c) require an authority acknowledging them (normally the state)	j) combine learning activities with other responsibilities such as work, family – must adapt their way of living temporarily for balancing the requirements of the programme and other obligations
d) require regulation of its relations with the initial educational system	k) find challenging (at least some) tasks involved in the programmes
e) support a substantial gain of competences in a range of fields, marking a clear difference between before/after the program	l) pursue personally significant goals of vital importance
f) provide – compared to the starting position – a substantial improvement in the competitive position on internal/external labour markets (no matter if realised or not)	m) undergo a period of intensified reflection on whether or not to go for substantial changes in career (and/or other fields of the life structure)
g) overcome potentially the symbolic consequences of being excluded from progressing to higher levels of education	

Source: Own description

On a societal level, formal adult education was found distinctive from other types of adult education including the most frequent types of company training in particular

- the extent in which formal adult education provides a supportive environment
- the interaction with the initial educational system
- the function in providing access to particular positions in the labour market (coordination between the education system and the employment system).
- the capacity to promote social mobility of the participants (between occupational fields, between social classes and communities)

Finally, formal adult education could be understood as a particular *social institution*, however, closely connected to the initial education system. Further steps within the project will provide a clarification of this proposal within the framework of new intuitionism in educational research.

Further information

Further information about this subproject can be found on the project website <http://LLL2010.tlu.ee>
 Details about the entire project and the other subprojects, including reports, are also available there.



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