

Participation and opportunities of participating in formal and non-formal adult learning and continuing education and training (CET)

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Long before adult learning was given the significance on the political agenda that it has today in the discourse about lifelong learning, experts on reflective educational practice as well as researchers were already theorising about participation in adult learning. Participation and also non-participation in organised adult learning show consistent patterns as regards inequality. And also the PIAAC data reveals well-known participation and obstruction patterns based on gender, age, employment status and educational qualifications.

This article explores the connection between the competence levels attained and participation in CET. Here, the opportunities of taking part in CET, which differ depending on the competence levels achieved, reveal a complex picture. The competence values of those people who actually take part in CET differ significantly from the values of those who do not. This applies both to formal and non-formal CET and also to each of the three tested competences. The general rule is: the higher the competence level achieved, the higher is actual participation.

Analysing the explanatory value of the achieved competence level (by the example of literacy skills) for the opportunity of taking part in (formal or non-formal) CET reveals a highly differentiated picture. The opportunity of taking part in CET increases for all people as competence levels increase. For those whose highest educational attainment is compulsory schooling, the opportunity of participation is also intact at the lower competence levels however. At the same time it turns out that people at the highest (literacy skills) levels have a 4-times higher opportunity of taking part in CET than those with competences at Level 2.

The already available finding that there are inequalities in terms of access to education also in the field of CET is confirmed when analysing competence levels. Different groups benefit in different ways when attaining the next higher competence level. People aged 25 to 34 years, individuals who are appropriately qualified for their job, and people without children can considerably enhance their opportunity to take part in CET as their competence levels increase. But, even with higher literacy skills, those who are underqualified for their work do not have the same opportunities of taking part in CET as those who are appropriately qualified or overqualified. On the other hand, for the group with the highest literacy skills, the opportunity of participation is higher where no need to take part in CET is perceived than where this need is expressed. The opportunity to take part in CET does not increase considerably after attaining a higher competence level for people aged between 35 and 44, holders of the upper secondary school-leaving exam or of higher education qualifications, individuals who express the need to take part in CET, formally underqualified people and those with children.

If the focus is on deliberately controlling and reducing the gap between participants and non-participants, this can confirm problems that are known based on this data, but can also raise new issues, for professionally addressing control mechanisms of participation – such as subjective or structural barriers.

Keywords: continuing education and training (CET), motivation to take part in education and training, social differentiation, inequality, control mechanism