

Adult Education Survey (AES) methodology

Statistics Explained

This article describes the methodology of the [adult education survey \(AES\)](#) , a [European Union \(EU\)](#) harmonised survey on adult participation in learning activities.

The AES along with the following two other data collections, the [continuing vocational training survey \(CVTS\)](#) and the [EU labour force survey \(EU-LFS\)](#) provide EU statistics on [lifelong learning](#) .

Introduction

The AES provides an overview of the participation of individuals in education and training (i.e. formal and non-formal education and training as well as informal learning). The reference period for the participation in the learning activities is the twelve months prior to the interview. A pilot survey took place around the year 2007, followed by an AES in 2011, 2016 and 2022, underpinned by European legislation. Up to 2016, the survey focused on people aged 25-64. Due to changes in the legislation, the most recent AES covered people aged 18-69.

The following information is available from the AES:

- Participation in formal education, non-formal education and training and informal learning (respectively labelled FE, NFE and INF);
- Access to information on learning possibilities;
- Time spent on education and training;
- Characteristics of the learning activities;
- Reasons for not participating;
- Obstacles to participation;
- Employer financing and costs of learning;
- Self-reported language skills.

Comparable data from 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2022 AES can be found in the following folders of the database:

- Participation in education and training (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m0);
- Participation in informal learning (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m4);
- Access to information on education and training (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m1);
- Time spent on education and training (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m2);
- Obstacles to participation in education and training (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m3);
- Self-reported language skills (educ_lang_00).

Coverage and mandate

Four waves of the AES have been implemented so far. The first AES (2007 AES) was a pilot survey conducted in 26 EU Member States (Ireland and Luxembourg did not participate), as well as in Norway, Switzerland and Turkey. This first wave was carried out based on a gentlemen's agreement between 2005 and 2008 (depending on the country).

The second wave (2011 AES) was conducted in 27 EU Member States (Croatia did not participate), Norway, Switzerland as well as in Serbia and Turkey between July 2011 and June 2012. This statistical operation was for the first time conducted under the institutional mandate set in [Regulation 452/2008](#), and implemented by [Regulation 823/2010](#). This legal basis establishes the collection of data on the participation of adults (aged 25–64) in learning activities every five years.

The third wave (2016 AES) was conducted in the 28 EU Member States, Norway, Switzerland as well as in Serbia, Turkey, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia between July 2016 and March 2017. [Regulation 1175/2014](#) provided the implementation details of this wave.

The fourth wave (2022 AES) was conducted in the 27 EU Member States, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland as well as in Serbia, Turkey, Albania, and North Macedonia between July 2022 and March 2023. Data collection is based on [Regulation 861/2021](#).

Further information on each wave is available in the [reference metadata](#) and in the [implementation manuals](#).

Basic concepts

Lifelong learning encompasses all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within personal, civic, social or employment-related perspectives. The intention or aim to learn is the critical point that distinguishes these activities from non-learning activities, such as cultural or sporting activities.

Adult learning means the participation of adults in lifelong learning. Adult learning usually refers to learning activities after the end of [initial education](#). The main indicator of adult learning is the **participation rate in education and training** of those aged 25-64 and covers participation in both formal and non-formal education and training.

Learning activities are any activities of an individual organised with the intention to improve their knowledge, skills, and competences. There are two fundamental criteria that distinguish learning activities from non-learning activities: they must be intentional and organised. **Intentional** learning (as opposed to random learning) is defined as a deliberate search for knowledge, skills or competences or attitudes of lasting value. **Organised** learning is defined as learning planned in a pattern or sequence with explicit or implicit aims.

The learning activities are defined within a classification named [classification of learning activities \(CLA\)](#). The current version of the CLA (2016 edition) is aligned with [ISCED 2011](#).

The 2016 edition of the CLA applies to the 2016 and 2022 AES. 2007 and 2011 AES refer to the 2006 edition of the CLA; however, data between the waves are overall comparable.

The CLA defines three main types of learning activities as follows:

Classification of learning activities

Codes	Broad categories / classes / sub-classes
1.	Formal education
2.	Non-formal education
2.1.	Non formal programmes
2.2.	Courses:
2.2.1.	<i>Courses conducted via classroom instruction (including lectures)</i>
2.2.2.	<i>Combined theoretical-practical courses (including workshops)</i>
2.2.3.	<i>Courses conducted through open and distance education</i>
2.2.4.	<i>Private tuition (private lessons)</i>
2.3.	Guided on-the-job-training
2.4.	Other non-specified elsewhere
3.	Informal learning
3.1.	Taught Learning
3.1.1.	<i>Coaching / Informal tuition</i>
3.1.2.	<i>Guided visits</i>
3.2.	Non-taught learning
3.2.1.	<i>Self-learning</i>
3.2.2.	<i>Learning-group</i>
3.2.3.	<i>Practice</i>
3.2.4.	<i>Non-guided visits</i>

Source: Classification of learning activities manual (2016).



Table 1: Classification of learning activities Source: Eurostat, Classification of learning activities manual (2016)

- **Formal education and training** is defined as “education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned through public organisations and recognised private bodies, and - in their totality - constitute the formal education system of a country. Formal education programmes are thus recognised as such by the relevant national education or equivalent authorities, e.g. any other institution in cooperation with the national or sub-national education authorities. Formal education consists mostly of initial education [...]. Vocational education, special needs education and some parts of adult education are often recognised as being part of the formal education system. Qualifications from formal education are by definition recognised and, therefore, are within the scope of ISCED. Institutionalised education occurs when an organisation provides structured educational arrangements, such as student-teacher relationships and/or interactions, that are specially designed for education and learning”.¹
- **Non-formal education and training** is defined as “education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned by an education provider. The defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an addition, alternative and/or complement to formal education within the process of lifelong learning of individuals. It is often provided in order to guarantee the right of access to education for all. It caters to people of all ages but

¹Source ISCED 2011.

does not necessarily apply a continuous pathway structure; it may be short in duration and/or low-intensity; and it is typically provided in the form of short courses, workshops or seminars. Non-formal education mostly leads to qualifications that are not recognised as formal or equivalent to formal qualifications by the relevant national or sub-national education authorities or to no qualifications at all. Nevertheless, formal, recognised qualifications may be obtained through exclusive participation in specific non-formal education programmes; this often happens when the non-formal programme completes the competencies obtained in another context”.²

- **Informal learning** is “intentional, but it is less organised and less structured ... and may include for example learning events (activities) that occur in the family, in the workplace, and in the daily life of every person, on a self-directed, family-directed or socially-directed basis.”³

Job-related non-formal education and training : the respondent takes part in the non-formal education and training activity in order to obtain knowledge and/or learn new skills needed for a current or future job, to increase earnings, to improve job and/or career opportunities in a current or another field and generally to improve his/her opportunities for advancement and promotion.

Employer-sponsored job-related non-formal education and training : all job-related non-formal education and training activities paid at least partially by the employer and/or done during paid working hours.

Usual breakdowns and classifications

Educational attainment level

The educational attainment level is the highest level of education successfully completed by an individual. Educational attainment is classified according to the [International standard classification of education \(ISCED\)](#) . This classification allows for international comparability between the different national education systems, introducing criteria to categorise the education levels into a common nomenclature. It therefore facilitates comparisons across countries based on uniform and internationally agreed definitions.

The successful completion of an education programme must be validated by a recognised qualification, i.e. a qualification officially recognised by the relevant national education authorities. In cases where there is no certification, successful completion must be associated with full attendance. When determining the highest level, both general and vocational education should be taken into consideration.

2016 and 2022 AES were classified according to ISCED 2011; 2007 and 2011 AES were classified under ISCED 1997.

The AES data dissemination considers the following broad levels of aggregation:

- Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education: this aggregate refers to levels 0, 1 and 2 of the ISCED 2011 (online code ED0-2). Data up to 2011 refer to ISCED 1997 levels 0, 1 and 2 but also include level 3C short (educational attainment from ISCED level 3 programmes of less than two years);
- Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education: this aggregate corresponds to ISCED 2011 levels 3 and 4 (online code ED3_4). ISCED 2011 level 3 programmes of partial level completion are considered within ISCED level 3. Data up to 2011 refer to ISCED 1997 levels 3C long, 3A, 3B and 4;
- Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education - general: this aggregate corresponds to ISCED 2011 levels 34 and 44 (online code ED3_4GEN). Data are available from 2022 onwards;
 - Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education - vocational: this aggregate corresponds to ISCED 2011 levels 35 and 45 (online code ED3_4VOC). Data are available from 2022 onwards;

²Source ISCED 2011.

³Source CLA 2016.

- Tertiary education: this aggregate covers ISCED 2011 levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 (short-cycle tertiary education, bachelor's or equivalent level, master's or equivalent level, doctoral or equivalent level, online code ED5-8 'tertiary education'). Data up to 2011 refer to ISCED 1997 levels 5 and 6.

Occupation

Occupation is defined as the task and duties undertaken by each worker in their job. The [International standard classification of occupations \(ISCO\)](#) organises jobs into a clearly defined set of groups.

AES as from 2011 were classified according to ISCO-08; 2007 AES was classified under ISCO-COM 88. Data are directly comparable for the categories shown online.

Four categories of employee occupations are distinguished in the online tables on occupation:

- Managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals;
- Clerical support workers, service and sales workers;
- Skilled manual workers; and
- Elementary occupations.

Foreign languages - level of self-reported knowledge

The knowledge of foreign languages is self-reported by the respondents and is categorised in four levels in the AES questionnaire (except in 2011 where the category 'hardly any language skills' was not included).

- Hardly any language skills;
- Beginner (basic user);
- Intermediate (independent user); and
- Advanced (proficient user).

In the online tables of the domain `educ_lang_00`, only the categories 'basic', 'good' and 'proficient' are displayed; the category 'hardly any language skills' is included in the category 'basic'.

Degree of urbanisation

Three types of areas are defined based on population density:

- **cities** : at least 50% of the population lives in urban centres;
- **towns and suburbs** : at least 50% of the population lives in urban clusters and less than 50% of the population lives in urban centres;
- **rural areas** : at least 50% of the population lives in rural grid cells.

Questionnaire

The 2022 AES European standard questionnaire has the following structure:

1.0 - General information

1.1 - Information on the household

1.2 - Information on the individual

1.2.1 Demographic background

1.2.2 Educational attainment

1.2.3 Not completed formal education

1.2.4 Main activity status

- 1.2.5 Characteristics of the main job
- 1.2.6 Parental education and country of birth
- 1.3 - Access to information about learning possibilities and guidance
- 1.4 - Participation in education and training
 - 1.4.1 Formal education
 - 1.4.2 Non-formal education and training
 - 1.4.2.1 Details on activities
- 1.5 - Obstacles to participation in education and training
- 1.6 - Informal learning
- 1.7 - Languages
- 1.8 - Self-perceived health
- 1.9 - Income of the household

Quality reports

National quality reports for the 2022 AES are gradually being published via the reference metadata.

For the 2016 AES, national quality reports are available on [Circabc](#) . Summary tables for the EU are available on [Circabc](#) .

For the 2011 AES, national quality reports as well as an EU quality report featuring metadata and methodological aspects of the survey are available on [Circabc](#) .

For the 2007 AES, an evaluation of the national quality reports is available on [Circabc](#) .

Source data for tables and graphs

- [Tables and figures](#)

Context

[Eurostat](#) publishes data on education and training which can be found on Eurostat's [database](#) and cover the following features:

- participation in education and training;
- learning mobility;
- education personnel;
- education finance;
- education and training outcomes;
- languages.

These statistics are based on four main data sources:

- Education systems – joint UNESCO-OECD-Eurostat (UOE) data collection;

- Adult education survey (AES);
- Continuing vocational training survey (CVTS); and
- Labour force survey (EU-LFS).

Statistics on adult learning – which can be found under the folder 'adult learning' in the 'participation in education and training' section of Eurostat's database on education and training – are based on the AES, the LFS and the CVTS.

The adult education survey and the labour force survey both provide data on participation in adult learning from the individuals' perspective while the CVTS covers the theme of adult learning through the enterprises (continuing vocational training).

The LFS also provides data on the participation in formal and non-formal education and training on a more frequent basis than the AES. Main differences in the data on education and training in the LFS and in the data on education and training in the AES are the reference period (4 weeks and – from 2022 – 12 months in the LFS, 12 months in the AES), the coverage of non-formal education (the LFS does not cover guided on-the-job training) and the overall aim and design of the surveys (AES is a survey dedicated to learning activities, LFS is about labour market participation, and also especially the fact that proxies are possible when collecting the LFS data while they are not recommended and almost never used in most countries when collecting the AES data).

On the other hand, the information found in the AES is richer than that of the LFS in the sense that the AES describes the learning activities in depth and also offers information on the command of foreign languages.

Other articles

- [Education and training in the EU - facts and figures](#)

Database

[Education and training \(educ\)](#)

For adult participation in learning, see:

Participation in education and training (educ_part)

Adult learning (trng)

Participation in education and training (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m0)

Participation in informal learning (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m4)

Access to information on education and training (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m1)

Time spent on education and training (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m2)

Obstacles to participation in education and training (last 12 months) (trng_aes_12m3)

For self-reported language skills, see:

Languages (educ_lang)

Self-reported language skills (educ_lang_00)

Dedicated section

- [Education and training](#)

Publications

- [Adult learning statistics](#)
- [Adult learning statistics - characteristics of education and training](#)
- [Access to microdata](#)

Methodology

- [Adult Education Survey \(reference metadata\)](#)
- [AES – EU implementation manuals and further methodological information](#)

External links

- [EU policy in the field of adult learning](#)
- [UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning](#)

View this article online at

http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Article_name