

Segmenting Non-Participation in Lifelong Learning: A Social Marketing Analysis of Low-Qualified Adults in the European Union

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Abstract

This paper examines unequal participation in adult learning in the European Union through the lens of social marketing, understood here as a behaviour-change approach for social good rather than social media marketing. The study addresses a persistent policy problem: despite the European target that 60% of adults should participate in training each year by 2030, participation remains below target and is stratified by education, employment status, and skill level. The paper asks three questions: how large are the participation gaps affecting low-qualified adults, what barriers and patterns of non-participation are visible in recent European data, and how can social marketing help design more inclusive policy responses.

The analysis is based on secondary data from the Eurostat Adult Education Survey 2022, the EU Labour Force Survey 2024, the OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2023, Eurostat evidence on reasons for non-participation, OECD learner-profile segmentation work, and supporting Cedefop and European Commission monitoring reports. The results show that low-qualified adults participate in learning far less than highly educated adults, and that non-participants are not a homogeneous group. Some adults are willing to learn but face barriers related to cost, time, care responsibilities or access, while others report no perceived need for further education and training. The evidence also suggests that current adult-learning provision remains closely linked to employment, limiting access for adults outside stable labour-market positions.

The paper argues that adult-learning policy should shift from broad promotion to a segmented intervention design. A social marketing model is proposed around the marketing mix: relevant and confidence-building learning offers, reduced participation costs, accessible delivery in trusted local settings, targeted communication for different learner groups, and strategies to address competing pressures such as fatigue, insecurity and negative prior educational experiences. The paper concludes that a behaviour-focused, audience-centred approach can make lifelong-learning policy more equitable and more effective.

Keywords

Social marketing, adult learning, lifelong learning, low-qualified adults, education policy.