

Vocational secondary education for low-educated adults – lack of opportunities and/or motivation?

Summary

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In the 2017/2018 academic year, 1035 students aged 20 or above studied in vocational secondary education. While the total number of adults in vocational education is increasing, those in vocational secondary education is in the opposite trend. The challenge is that of all adults with no secondary education aged 20 or more (about 100,000 people), only a small share is acquiring secondary education (ca 5%). **The aim of this research** is to analyse the supply of vocational secondary education to adults and its learning arrangements, to analyse the factors supporting or hindering taking up formal education and the needs and attitudes towards vocational secondary education among the target group. To achieve this, the analysis relies on the data of Estonian Education Information System, Estonian Labour Force Survey, 12 interviews with adults with low educational attainment, 2 focus group interviews with representatives of vocational education and adult upper secondary schools, 2 interviews with career counsellors working with adults (Unemployment Insurance Fund) and an overview of information available for learning for adults in the schools' web sites.

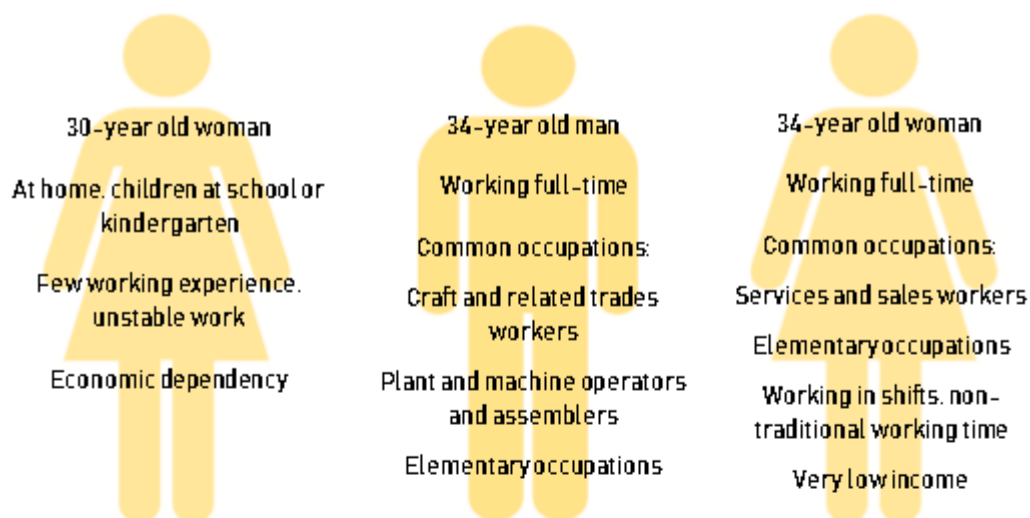
In order to make vocational secondary education a viable option for adults, it is necessary to adjust the learning arrangements to the needs of adults and to empower low-educated adults in their learning efforts and enhance motivation. **The priority should be in adjusting vocational secondary education according to the specific needs of adult learners.** According to the results, adults are not considered as a target group in vocational secondary education, which creates and enhances the entry barrier: information on learning opportunities is geared towards young learners and schools do not have the resources or skills to consider the specific needs of adult learners. To achieve this, it is necessary to:

- Support vocational education schools in defining adults as a target group in vocational secondary education programmes, mapping the target group and developing outreach activities (message design, designing activities to introduce vocational secondary education to adults).
- Develop diversified learning arrangement in vocational secondary education, including learning in limited, intensive sessions (rather than full time, every working day), introducing good practices in flexible learning arrangements, developing teaching methodologies adjusted to adult learners in vocational secondary education, combining vocational and secondary education (general education) subjects, certifying skills and knowledge acquired in previous working experience in acquiring formal education programmes.
- Promote cooperation of vocational education schools with different partners, including adult secondary education schools (developing a cooperation platform and finding new ways of cooperating in teaching low skilled adults, piloting new cooperation forms), Unemployment Insurance Fund (popularise the support mechanism available from Unemployment Insurance Fund in schools and education programmes that meet the qualification criteria, developing an automated reporting system where all the qualified candidates applying for learning are guided to Unemployment Insurance Fund for support), and with non-formal education providers within vocational education schools and outside (developing a system of transition between short courses and formal education to provide a smooth transition into formal education, certifying the skills and knowledge acquired in courses and considering this in formal education and introducing different vocational education programmes in a brief format).

Nevertheless, it is also **important to empower low-educated adults in taking up formal education.**

WHAT MOTIVATES POTENTIAL LEARNERS?

- ◆ Employment perspective, connection between studies and work
- ◆ Interest to take up further learning (higher education)
- ◆ Interesting choice of fields of education
- ◆ Need to achieve something (higher self-esteem, ability to manage studies, to be a role model)
- ◆ Positive learning experiences and role models among friends and relatives
- ◆ Support and guidance from employers, close people, Unemployment Insurance Fund, school)
- ◆ 'Two-in-one' option—to gain vocational and secondary education at the same time
- ◆ Interest in learning is higher compared to younger age
- ◆ Outside motivation—secondary or vocational education is mandatory at work

POTENTIAL LEARNER TYPES**WHAT ARE THE MAIN OBSTACLES?**

- ◆ Lack of time—combining learning with work and family life
- ◆ Fears and preconceptions about managing learning, low learning experience
- ◆ Age biases from schools, adults themselves and other students
- ◆ Financial insecurity, low incomes
- ◆ Few learning opportunities or working perspective in those professions in the local area
- ◆ Low Estonian skills

Making the decision to take up formal education is not an easy one. It is impacted by psychological barriers, preconceptions about learning, the attitudes of others and practical barriers that make it difficult to start formal education studies. Adults with low education need support in overcoming these barriers and raising the motivation to take up formal education. This support can be provided through:

- Raising the self-esteem of adults as potential learners to support their motivation to take up learning, including sharing the experience stories of adults as learners (including those in vocational secondary education), supporting and enhancing the image of adult learners as courageous, active and self-confident people, enhancing counselling and experience sharing between students and reducing age-related biases in learning in the general public.
- Popularising secondary and vocational education in the society, including stressing the benefits of acquiring vocational and secondary education in the labour market and further learning, popularising vocational secondary education among employers (rewarding employers supporting acquiring formal education, including vocational secondary education).
- Visualising the career pathways in vocational secondary education (the opportunities that arise in the labour market and further learning when following through the specific learning programme), collecting and presenting the career pathways of previous students in vocational secondary education, supporting access to career counselling for low-educated adults.
- Supporting overcoming practical barriers, including combining learning work and family life (sharing practical experiences in combining different working practices with learning, rewarding employers enabling formal learning, offering child care arrangements outside traditional child care hours in evenings and weekends), supporting mobility for gaining access to learning facilities, providing financial support to students in need (including raising awareness of available support mechanisms in schools as well as Unemployment Insurance Fund or other funding mechanisms), reducing language barriers providing more opportunities to learn Estonian language, including professional language.
- Improving availability of information on learning opportunities, including raising the clarity of information available on learning programmes on schools' websites, sharing learning information from different sources (schools, Unemployment Insurance Fund, local governments), arranging career fairs specifically geared towards adults (including low-educated adults).

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