

i SKILL

D3.2 – National policy brief BULGARIA

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National context for adult learning¹

Bulgaria has a significant and long-standing tradition in the development of adult learning and continuing education, dating back to the 1870s, when the first Sunday and evening schools were organised with the aim of increasing literacy among the population. The country was among the first to join the consultation process for the European Memorandum on Lifelong Learning of 2000 and has continued to actively follow EU lifelong learning policies and initiatives.

Economic concerns dominate the development of lifelong and adult learning policies in Bulgaria. This fact can be associated with a) recent tendencies in socioeconomic development and b) shortages of professional skills in human resources. There is instability in the labour market with a fluctuating unemployment rate, an ageing labour force, and a relatively high level of poverty. The share of the working-age population among the total population has also decreased significantly from 61.8 % in 2012 to 58.5 % in 2022². The other predominant perspective of Bulgarian lifelong learning policy is *social inclusion* – lifelong learning is regarded as a means for reducing poverty and overcoming social exclusion among groups at risk.

The adult learning sector in Bulgaria is heterogeneous and includes different kinds of institutions that are regulated by different normative acts (Boyadjieva et al., 2013; Boyadjieva et al., 2017).

All nationally representative employers' organisations and trade unions make up the main actors in the social dialogue on adult learning in Bulgaria (Kirov, 2019).

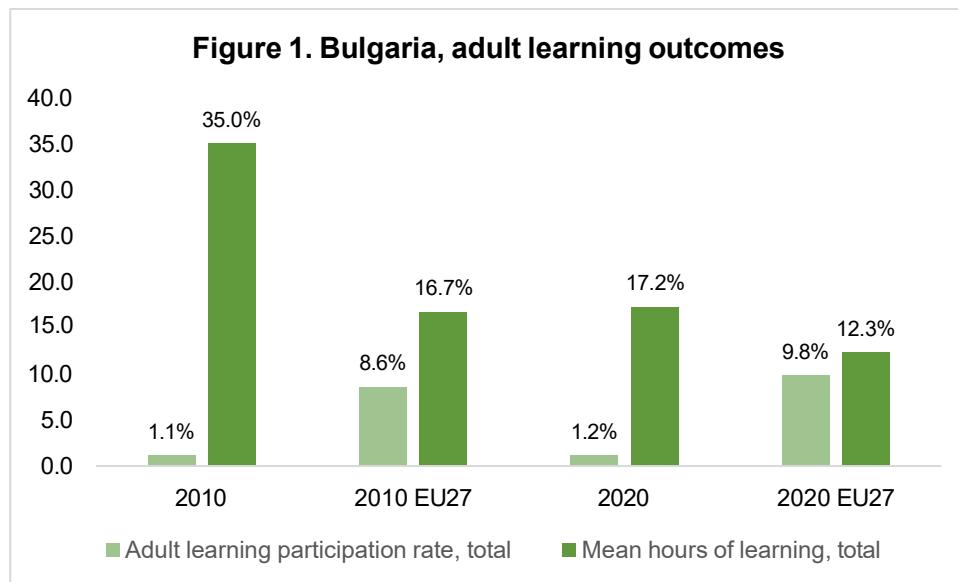
At the present stage, however, the effects of the lifelong learning policies are modest, as most of the challenges surrounding adult learning over the last several years remain. *Bulgaria is among countries with the lowest participation rate in lifelong learning in the EU*. The participation rate (4 weeks preceding the survey) of people aged 25–64 was 2 % in 2019, 1.6 % in 2020, 1.8 % in 2021 and 1.7% in 2022 (9 percentage points below the EU27 average).

Below we present figures which illustrate some adult learning outcomes and inequalities in participation in adult learning.

¹ For a detailed overview of the national context, see Boyadjieva, P., Kirov, V., Yordanova, G. (2023). *I SKILL National Report - Bulgaria*. Working Paper I SKILL Project - Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue to Kick-in Inclusive Adult Learning – Deliverable 3.1 available at: https://cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/D-3.1-I-SKILL-National-Report_Bulgaria.pdf

² <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/13038/population-working-age-status-place-residence-sex-and-districts-and-municipalities>

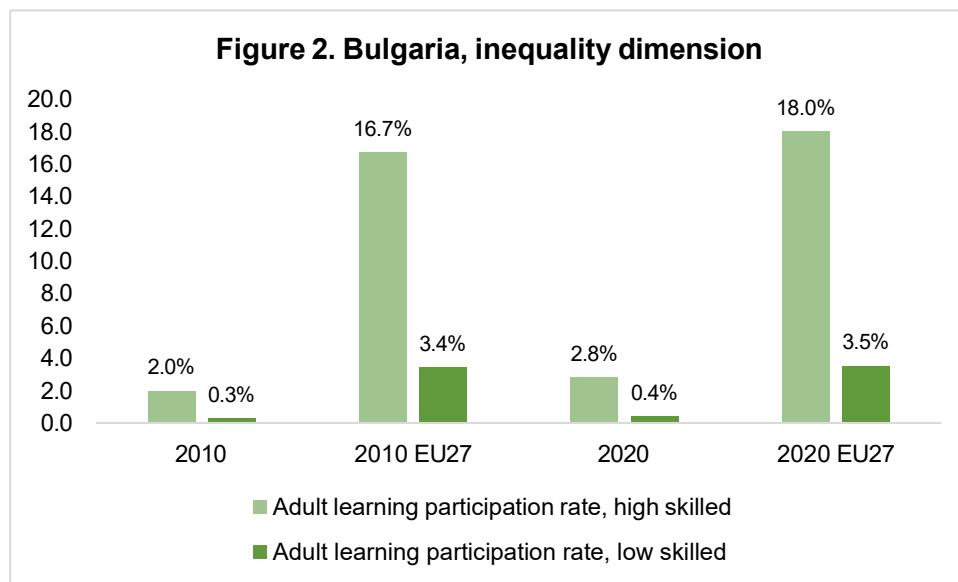
Participation in adult learning



Source: Own calculations based on the Eurostat Labour Force Survey 2010 and 2020.

Note: Variables refer to the population of employed adults, aged 25-64.

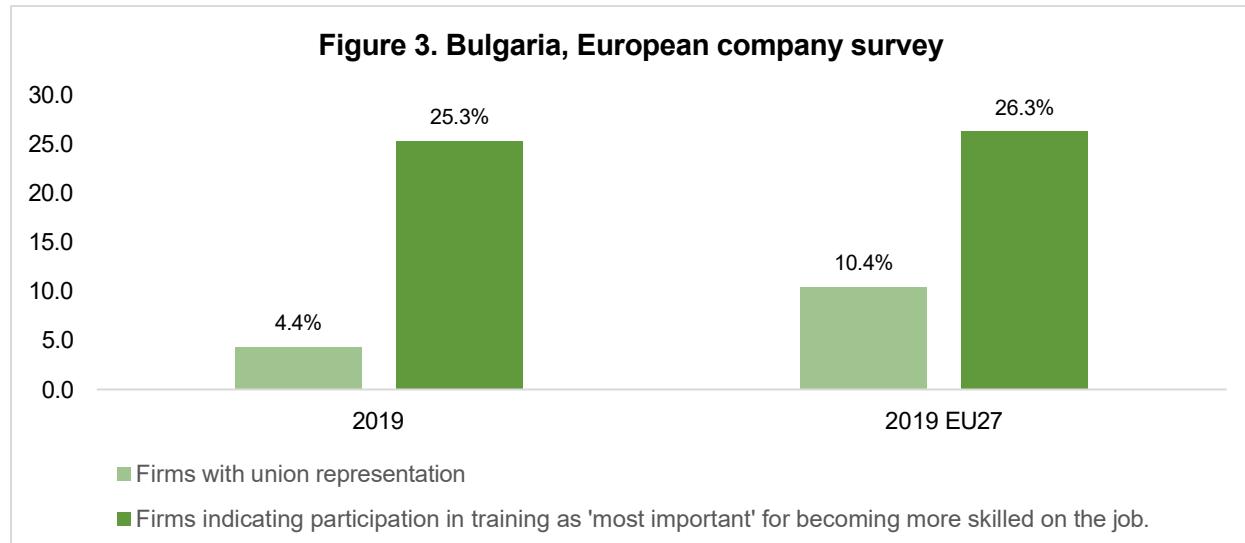
Inequality dimensions



Source: Own calculations based on the Eurostat Labour Force Survey 2010 and 2020.

Note: Variables for low-skilled refer to the population of employed adults, aged 25-64, ISCED levels 0-2; variables for high-skilled refer to the whole population, aged 25-64, ISCED levels 5-6.

Firms, union representation and the importance of training



Source: Own calculations based on the European Company Survey 2019 dataset.

Inclusive adult learning, industrial relations and social dialogue: Main takeaways from the National Report³

- The *available policy documents and legislation related to adult learning in Bulgaria are largely relevant* and address most of the problems in Bulgarian adult learning. The future development of the adult learning system in the country will depend on the successful implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning (2021–2030), the Human Resources Development Programme 2021–2027 and the Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021–2030.
- The 2016 participation rate (12 months preceding the survey) of people aged 25–64 in Bulgaria (24.6 %) was below the EU28 average (38 %). What is more, *the national target for 2030 (33 %)*, as defined in the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021–2030)⁴, *remains below both the EU28 average in 2016 and the target of 50 % for 2025*, defined in the European Skills Agenda⁵. According to the Human Resources Development Programme 2021–2027⁶, the share of the population aged 25–64 having been included in training in the past 12 months should reach up to 35.4 % by 2030, i.e. again below the EU28 average for 2016.
- A real challenge is *how to involve the social groups who are most in need of continuing training and qualification*. According to Eurostat data for 2018 and 2019, the

³ The National Report is based on desk research of literature and policy documents and on an empirical survey of the metal sector (data from semi-structured interviews, a roundtable discussion and a national workshop).

⁴ Стратегическа рамка за развитие на образованието, обучението и ученето в Република България (2021-2030) [Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021–2030)], available at: <https://www.mon.bg/bg/143> (In Bulgarian), p. 45.

⁵<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223#:~:text=The%20European%20Skills%20Agenda%20is%20a%20five-year%20plan,on%20the%20lessons%20learnt%20during%20the%20COVID-19%20pandemic>

⁶ Available at <http://esf.bg/informatsiya/> (in both Bulgarian and English), p. 2.

participation rates (for the previous 4 weeks) in education and training of people aged 25–64 with less than primary and lower secondary education were extremely low: 0.7 % and 0.6 %, respectively, or 3.4 and 3.7 percentage points below the EU28 average⁷. In 2020 and 2021, it even became statistically negligible⁸. This is due mainly to the fact that, as acknowledged by the European Commission, 'Bulgaria is among the Member States in which socio-economic background has the strongest influence on learning outcomes' (EC, 2020: 6).

- All Bulgarian stakeholders agree that *adult learning, upskilling and reskilling are fundamental for the development of enterprises and the national economy*. They also share the view that social dialogue and partnership is key for building an efficient system of adult learning capable of overcoming the existing skills gaps and offering learners high-quality and relevant knowledge and skills.
- According to the representatives of trade unions, employers' organisations and training providers, *a major barrier to effective adult learning, upskilling and reskilling is the fragmentation of the institutional and policy framework*.
- It is also argued that *the formal school system is not suitable for training adults* and that many of the adult learning providers do not have teaching staff specialised in working with adults or – in many cases – the up-to-date technical equipment needed.
- There are also *psychological barriers*, especially among the less educated and low-skilled, who lack motivation or are reluctant to participate in further training because they experience fear of failure or worry about 'damaging' the device they are operating. According to the stakeholders, especially trade unions, the low level of motivation is also a result of the low pay, few opportunities for career development and difficult working conditions in the metal sector.
- The main initiatives related to adult learning are very often developed as part of different projects. For example, several projects have been implemented for the development of digital competences and for creating a model for making certain professions, including in the metal sector, more attractive.
- All stakeholders very positively evaluated the strengthening of cooperation between companies and universities in recent years.

Although the policies and measures that have recently been undertaken in the adult learning sector in Bulgaria are positive, for the time being, they are insufficient for properly addressing and overcoming some of the major problems in the development of adult learning in the country. The main *challenges* deserving more attention from all stakeholders and policymakers are the following:

- low effectiveness in the way the reforms and programmes have been implemented, which is clearly evident from the fact that Bulgaria remains among countries with the lowest participation in lifelong learning in the EU;
- extremely low levels of participation in adult learning among the social groups most in need of continuing training and qualifications, such as those with less than primary and lower secondary education and the unemployed;

⁷ Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by type, sex, and age, Eurostat code trng_lfs_09, Last update: 16/02/2023.

⁸ Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks) by type, sex, age and educational attainment level, Eurostat code trng_lfs_10, Last update: 16/02/2023.

- insufficient correspondence between people's education and qualifications and the needs of the labour market;
- inadequacy of the infrastructure for adult learning and its very uneven distribution across the country;
- insufficient involvement of employers in the development of programmes for adult learning, as well as funding for internal training;
- lack of a well-developed system for forecasting skills needs. In addition, there is a lack of timely and comprehensive impact analyses and of systematic, evidence-based mechanisms for the evaluation and monitoring of measures and programmes in adult learning.

Adult learning policy as a separate policy: Company learning opportunities and culture

A major issue of adult learning in Bulgaria, highlighted by the representatives of employers' organisations, trade unions and training providers, is its fragmentation and the need to develop an integrated adult learning policy as a separate policy from that of the formal education system, in which social partners have a very active role.

The employers' organisation representatives shared the view that social partners are better placed to identify skills needs and propose sufficient training, not only at the sectoral level but also at the level of individual enterprises. It is argued that employers have an interest in investing in skills. This is also the case for trade unions, as training will increase the productivity, and respectively the income, of workers and employees. Social partners are also well positioned to anticipate skills needs: during the last three years, they have been collaborating with the Ministry of Education in order to introduce 'Sectoral Skills Councils' in Bulgaria, following the UK model. One of the first sectors to be included is the metal/machine-building sector. These sectoral councils will also operate under the future Sectoral Training Funds initiative, planned as part of the Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2021–2027, and should be included in upcoming changes to the Vocational Education and Training Act, envisaged in late 2023 or 2024.

Many companies in the country have developed their own culture of learning and have built training centres and internal training platforms in order to overcome the skills gaps of their employees. For example, a multinational company in the metal sector with a branch in Bulgaria has an internal online training platform that is accessible to all employees globally. Some of the training is for new employees and new roles; other training is aimed at knowledge refreshment and retraining. Training is held during employees' working hours and is free of charge. It is available in a hybrid form – online or in person. The training is conducted by both company employees (mainly for technical skills) and external training providers (mainly for soft skills). Among the main topics are productivity, management, leadership, coaching, presentation skills, interviewing skills, language skills (English), computer skills (Excel) and communication.

In order to fill gaps in the university education of their employees, the company has established its own engineering academy as well as a technical academy in partnership with another company from the same sector.

In addition to both introductory and ongoing training opportunities, every employee has a 'buddy' upon joining the company. The buddy, a kind of mentor, is someone whose main role is to help the employee integrate into the work environment both informally and formally. Therefore, companies rely mainly on workplace learning to train early-career workers (Kirov et al., 2023).

The company has had good collaboration with universities in Bulgaria and neighbouring countries by offering different types of internship programmes with the possibility of employment upon

successful completion. It provides all its employees (regardless of speciality) with paid leave for self-study, as prescribed by the Labour Code (Article 169)⁹, during their education at university.

Recommendations from the National Report

Analysis of the development of adult learning in Bulgaria, especially considering data from the interviews carried out and the roundtable with stakeholders, enables us to formulate a number of *recommendations* for how to address the problems and challenges faced by the country's adult learning system:

- Develop an adult learning policy as a separate policy from that which covers the formal education system through the elaboration of a new normative act – the Adult Learning (Skills) Act.
- Simplify the administrative burden in the context of EU-funded public measures for learning in companies.
- Integrate the adult learning system in order to overcome the existing institutional fragmentation.
- Encourage more active involvement of all social partners in adult learning; further develop the planned sectoral funds and sectoral councils.
- Promote collective bargaining and social dialogue to improve the overall working conditions in order to stimulate training.
- Emphasise evaluation of the needed competences and skills and active involvement of social partners in this process.
- Introduce modern training techniques, adapted for adult learners, and a personalised approach, especially for low-skilled and less-educated social groups.
- Develop career guidance policy during school years, including a more attractive presentation of the sectors.
- Promote and further develop the validation process of skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning and practice.
- Improve the quality of adult learning.
- Develop specific initiatives and measures to motivate adults to participate in further learning and training.

The future improvement of adult learning in Bulgaria is interwoven with the development of other social spheres. This reflects the fact that many of the challenges faced by the adult learning system result from socioeconomic and institutional problems.

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⁹ <https://lex.bg/laws/doc/1594373121>

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