The European indicator of adult participation in lifelong learning: the significance of interview questions

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Indicators in the European Union

The growing salience of indicators and benchmarks in international educational policy-making has been widely noted. The European Union has been in the vanguard of this process: under the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC), indicators have been a central feature of EU governance. The OMC, involves ‘fixing guidelines’ for the EU and ‘specific timetables for achieving the goals’, ‘quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world’, ‘translating’ the guidelines ‘into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences’, and ‘monitoring, evaluation and peer review organised as mutual learning processes’. (European Council 2000: §37)

In the wake of ‘Lisbon’, Hingel (2001) argued the Directorate General for Education (DG-EAC) could ‘contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between Member States’. There was ‘a momentum of deepening co-operation in education’. Lisbon gave the EU an implicit ‘mandate to develop a “common interest approach” in education going beyond national diversities’, strengthening ‘the European dimension of national educational policies’. Hingel argued ‘more convergence and more intense interrelationships between educational systems’ went ‘hand in hand with subsidiar[i]ty. (Hingel 2001, pp. 19-20)

Within DG-EAC, this strategy was advanced in two main ways. A set of ‘concrete future objectives of education and training systems’ was developed to make ‘learning more attractive’. (Council of the EU 2001, p. 12) Second, indicator development was set in train. ‘Eurostat initiated a Task Force on “measuring lifelong learning”, in which other Commission DGs, EU agencies and networks as well as Member States, OECD and UNESCO have participated’ (CEC 2001a, p. 24). The Report of the Eurostat Task Force on Measuring Lifelong Learning (CEC 2001b) noted that the Labour Force Survey collected ‘data on participation of adults in education and training, … though there is a clear focus on formal education and job-related training’ (p. 7). It noted (Annex 5, p. 1) that a Commission regulation ‘on the organisation of a labour force sample survey’ included a question on ‘education or training received during previous four weeks’, and that questions could not be ‘very detailed’
as ‘the respondent is reporting also on other members of the household (proxy interview)’ (CEC 2001b, p. 19).

In 2002 an expert Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks (SGIB) was established ‘to give advice on the use of indicators as tools for measuring progress towards the common objectives’ (DG-EAC 2003a). SGIB issued a ‘final list of indicators’ for education and training in July 2003. It proposed 29, spread across the eight objectives (an average of 3.6 per objective; one objective had a single indicator, one had six). All were ‘based on already available’ data’, on ‘valid and comparable data’, and had been ‘accepted both by the SGIB and the [specialist] Working Groups responsible for the relevant areas/objectives’ (CEC DG-EAC 2003a).

Identifying and developing indicators did not prove easy. In 2004, Council and Commission emphasised ‘the need to improve the quality and comparability of existing indicators’; SGIB and Working Groups were asked to suggest new indicators. A ‘lack of relevant and comparable data’ caused difficulties in some areas (Council of the EU 2004). Nearly a year later, the Commission explained indicators had ‘twin roles of monitoring progress towards agreed objectives and functioning as a means for identifying good practice’, should be ‘based on pertinent, valid, and comparable data, and ... accepted by users as reasonably accurate measures of the matter they address’. Data ‘already available’ or in ‘forthcoming EU-level surveys’ were most desirable, on efficiency grounds (CEC 2004a, p. 4). Three schedules were proposed:

- Short-term activities (up to 1 year) ... give priority to using existing data sets available on an international level. Indicators based on such data can be prepared in the short term and at low cost.
- Medium-term activities (1 to 3 years): In some cases data is available on a national or other level but ... not yet ... on an international level. In other cases medium-term action involves adding questions to already existing survey vehicles or launching pilot projects. ..
- Long-term activities (3 or more years): If data is needed which is available neither on a national nor an international level, and which cannot be collected administratively, long-term strategies are required: in this case the developmental process will take at least three years. In most long-term strategies data must be generated via surveys. (CEC 2004a, p. 4.)

In May 2003, the European Council agreed:

to establish a series of reference levels of European average performance, while taking into account the starting point of the individual Member States which will be used as one of the tools for monitoring the implementation of the “Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe”. Reference levels of European average performance:
should be based on data that are comparable.
• do not define national targets.
• do not prescribe decisions to be taken by national governments, however national actions based on national priorities will contribute to their achievement. (CEU 2003, p. 4.)

By 2007 the European Council had ‘identified a framework of 16 core indicators for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives’. These, the Commission argued, enable the Commission and the Member States to:

• underpin key policy messages;
• analyse progress both at the EU and national levels;
• identify good performance for peer review and exchange; and
• compare performance with third countries. (CEC 2008, p. 10)

The core indicators ‘cover the whole learning continuum from pre-school to adult education, teachers' professional development and investment in education and training’.

Since 2004 the Commission has issued substantial annual reports on progress against the Lisbon benchmarks in education. It clearly feels they are significant for policy-making in the EU and member states. (In 2008 it also issued a leaflet based on the progress reports. The leaflet, ‘Five Education Benchmarks for Europe: Trends 2000-2006/07’ sets out the performance of the 27 member states in relation to the five benchmarks using a ‘traffic light’ approach).

**The Adult Participation in Lifelong Learning Benchmark**

The reference level (‘benchmark’) introduced for lifelong learning was:

by 2010, the European Union average level of participation in Lifelong Learning, should be at least 12.5% of the adult working age population (25-64 age group). (CEU 2003, p. 6)²

Each benchmark had to be associated with a measure or ‘indicator’. The measure adopted for lifelong learning was: ‘Percentage of population aged 25-64 participating in education and training in 4 weeks prior to the survey – Source Eurostat; Labour Force Survey.’ A ‘Eurostat taskforce’ was ‘currently undertaking work on a new Adult Education Survey that would yield a better measure of participation’ (CEU 2003, p. 6); the Council’s hope has not yet been realised.

**The Labour Force Survey**

Although co-ordinated by Eurostat, LFS is administered by EU member states (or associate states). In 2008 the 27 member states, together with three candidate countries and three EFTA countries, provided Eurostat with LFS ‘micro-data for
publication’ (Eurostat 2010, p. 2). From 2005 member states have been conducting a continuous quarterly survey, covering all weeks of each quarter. Candidate and EFTA countries, except Switzerland and Turkey, also carried out a continuous survey in 2008. (Eurostat 2010, p. 2)

Eurostat oversees the comparability of data, but each country conducts its own survey. Each retains – to a greater or lesser extent – national characteristics. An annual report outlines the ‘main characteristics of the national practices’ (Eurostat 2010). This shows national LFSs’ distinct histories. Some have functioned for several decades: ‘The French Labour Force Survey started in 1950 and was organised in 1954 as an annual survey. Redesigned in 2003, the survey is a continuous survey providing quarterly results.’ (Eurostat 2010, p. 19) ‘The Finnish Labour Force Survey (LFS) started in 1959’ (p. 43), as did the Swedish (p. 46). ‘The Spanish Labour Force Survey was launched for the first time in 1964, referencing to some quarters in each year until 1968. Between 1969 and 1974 it was biannual, but quarterly from 1975. In 1999 the survey was redesigned as a continuous survey providing quarterly results.’ (p. 17) ‘The [UK] survey started in 1973 as a biennial survey (not using the ILO definition of unemployment). It was redesigned in 1984 as an annual survey and from 1992 as a continuous, quarterly survey.’ (p. 48) The Belgian survey ‘started in 1983 as an annual survey, but has been continuous since January 1999 providing quarterly and yearly results’ (p. 4); the Greek survey began in 1981 ‘as an annual survey covering all weeks of the second quarter’; it was ‘redesigned as a continuous survey providing quarterly results’ in 1998 (p. 16).

Others are more recent. By and large, LFS was introduced in eastern Europe in the 1990s. In the Czech Republic the ‘has been conducted since December 1992 as a continuous quarterly survey, shifting from seasonal quarters to calendar quarters by the end of 1997.’ (p. 7) LFS was introduced in Hungary and Poland in 1992, in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia in 1993, in Latvia in 1995, in Estonia in 1997, and in Lithuania in 1998.

In each country, the LFS questionnaire is a substantial document, but the approach varies from country to country. In thirteen countries participation is compulsory; in twenty voluntary (Eurostat 2010, p. 61). The response rate varies from 32 per cent (Luxembourg) to 97.1 per cent (Germany) (participation is voluntary in both: there seems no particular association between compulsory participation and the response rate.) The average quarterly sample achieved in 2008 varied from 2,700 (Luxembourg) to 131,400 (Germany). (p. 62)

**Derivation of the Participation of Adults in Lifelong Learning index**

Given its policy significance, Commission and Council confidence (since 2003) that LFS provides a ‘pertinent, valid, and comparable’ indicator of participation in lifelong learning demands exploration. The indicator is now officially defined as follows:
This indicator refers to persons aged 25 to 64 who stated that they received education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey (numerator). The denominator consists of the total population of the same age group, excluding those who did not answer to the question ‘participation to education and training’. Both the numerator and the denominator come from the EU Labour Force Survey. The information collected relates to all education or training whether or not relevant to the respondent’s current or possible future job. (p. 178)

This is not a measure of all adult participation in lifelong learning: it applies only to adults aged 25-64 years. It excludes many young people, including those in employment, most retired people, and workers over ‘normal’ retirement age. Within these limits, it claims to reflect all kinds of lifelong learning, non-vocational as well as vocational.

**Findings**

From the definition, one might assume a common questionnaire is applied in all countries. This is not the case. Survey questions need to be administered in national language(s). Some adaptation to the national character of educational systems is also appropriate. The survey questions must therefore vary to some degree. Nevertheless, the extent of variation is *prima facie* surprising.

In the national LFSs, the questions contributing to the indicator are posed in various forms. We sought to identify the main features of their phrasing. We used 2009 English versions (published on the Eurostat website for most countries): where an English version was available only for an earlier year, we used the most recent. We reflected on any association between phraseology and reported participation rate.

In all cases, there is a clear delimitation to cover only the four weeks immediately preceding the survey: there are variations in how this is formulated, but these do not seem likely to influence the response.

For formal education, the adaptation of questions seems mainly to relate to the variety of schools and qualifications available. In some countries, such as the UK, questions on formal education are extensive; in others, like Greece, they are rather narrow. Representing education outside the formal system is much more complex in a comparative perspective; we noticed significant differences in this area.

Respondents should have ‘stated that they received education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey’. In the simplest case, Luxemburg asked: ‘Have you participated in educational programmes during the last four weeks?’ In general, however, the question was more complex – so constructing a total for those who had received education or training during the previous four weeks involves combining answers to two or more questions. The most common type divides education and training into formal and non-formal (or, in a common-used phrase, inside and outside
the ‘regular education system’). Thus in Lithuania ‘Have you been a student in regular education during the last 4 weeks?’ is complemented by ‘Did you attend any courses, seminars, conferences and etc. during last 4 weeks?’ In Hungary respondents are asked both ‘Did you attend any form of regular education or training during the last four weeks?’ and ‘Did you attend any form of the education or training outside the regular school system during the last four weeks?’

Questions often contain some brief, almost implicit, explanation of what education and training comprise. In Portugal: ‘... did you attend any courses, seminars, conferences, private lessons or other type of taught learning activities outside the regular education system?’ In Poland: ‘Did you participate in any courses, seminars, conferences or receive private lessons, instructions or participate in other forms of taught activities outside the regular education system during the previous four weeks, including the reference week as the last?’ and: ‘Were you a student (did you attend school) in regular education during the previous four weeks, including the reference week as the last?’

Most ‘implicit’ descriptions of education and training use a phrase such as ‘courses, seminars or conferences’. In some countries, slightly more developed examples are given: thus in Spain: ‘During the last four weeks have you carried out any type of studies or training outside the official syllabus? (Includes: courses imparted by private centres, courses given at the workplace, courses destined to unemployed, seminars, conferences, individual classes, etc.)’ In Ireland, the description is a great deal more sophisticated, including a definition of ‘regular (formal education)’. In most cases, however, descriptions emphasise job-related and/or academic purposes.

Finally, however, there are several countries where the questions give examples or descriptions of what might constitute education or training which encompass leisure, as well as more vocational, learning.

We divided the countries into four groups:

**Group A**

Group A consists of six countries: Sweden (SE), Finland (FI), the United Kingdom (UK), Slovenia (SI), Austria (AT), and Estonia (EE). In these, questions on education other than formal are constructed in a comprehensive or inclusive way. In Sweden, every ‘activity led by a teacher or instructor’ should be reported. The Finnish question includes examples, and asks whether a participant has ‘attended a course or seminar or received some other training related to e.g. work, profession or hobbies during the past four weeks.’ In four countries (UK, SI, AT and EE) questions include examples of educational activities: leisure or education classes (UK), sewing, cooking, sports, study circle, instruction, driving exam, religious classes (SI), leisure activities, sports and hobbies (e.g. art classes, foreign language courses, music classes, sports lessons, driving lessons) (AT), hobby courses, and other taught activities in Estonia (EE). Countries in Group A all had high or very high participation
rates in adult education in 2008: 32.4% (Sweden), 23.1% (Finland), 19.9% (UK), 13.9% (Slovenia), 13.2% (Austria) and 9.8% (Estonia).

**Group B**
Group B comprises eleven countries: Spain (ES), Slovakia (SK), France (FR), Cyprus (CY), Ireland (IE), Belgium (BE), Latvia (LV), Portugal (PT), Poland (PL), Bulgaria (BG) and Romania (RO). These are characterised by usage of a phrase such as ‘outside the syllabus’ or ‘outside the regular system’ to refer to non-formal education. There is also a very short description of education (e.g., ‘courses, seminars and conferences’) but no examples, and no mention of learning for leisure purposes. The phrase ‘outside the regular education system’ is used (except LV: ‘not incorporated into the educational system’). The division between formal and other-than-formal education is therefore attributed to institutional features of the system: participants are told what is ‘formal’ and that activities ‘outside regular education’ are not formal or regular. However, in this group the national context is absent (except IE, where information about ‘grinds’ is collected). By and large, the participation rates in this group are medium: between 4% and 9%.

**Group C**
Group C comprises just two countries: Hungary and Greece. In many respects the questions are similar to Group B. The main difference is a more extensive description of non-‘regular’ education. Questionnaires give examples of educational activities as follows: driving course, language course, computer (application) course and (in Greece) a list of 20 providers of non-formal education. Participation rates are low (Hungary: 3.1%, Greece: 1.5%). The questions imply that educational activities are associated with institutions which also provide formal education (e.g., ‘University program for adults’ in Greece, ‘vocational training after getting G.C.E.’ in Hungary). Therefore, despite mention of driving courses, the question may imply a more formal definition of education. Leisure or hobby activities are not mentioned.

**Group D**
Group D consists of Luxemburg (LU), the Czech Republic (CZ), and Lithuania (LT) – all relatively small geographically and in population. The group is characterized by extremely terse questions. Questionnaires in these countries contain just a single question referring to education which is not formal; in each case it is different. Participants are asked about ‘educational programmes’ (LU), ‘non-formal education’ (CZ), and ‘any courses, seminars, conferences’ (LT). Participation rates are moderate (LU: 8.5%, CZ: 7.8%, LT: 4.9%). It is difficult to say to what extend the definition used is clear to the participants and accurate to their educational experience.

One country has not been allocated to a group. In France, the questionnaire shows strong signs of national design. There was (in 2007) no question relating specifically to education taken in a four week period. Two questions are strongly related to participation in adult learning (‘During the last three months, have you attended
classes or a training course, however short?’ and ‘Are you attending training as part of your work contract?’). From these, and supplementary questions anent the starting and ending dates of these courses, the participation rate for the four weeks preceding the interview is presumably calculated.

**Conclusion**

There is a broad association between the nature of the question(s) posed about participation and the participation rate reported for each country. Countries which pose questions in the most comprehensive or inclusive way (giving examples, and explicitly mentioning leisure-related studies) have the highest participation rates. Of those which divide education into within and outside the ‘regular’ system tend to have medium or low participation rates: of these, those which give only job-related examples of non-‘regular’ education tend to have lower participation rates than those which provide less specific examples. There appears to be some association between high participation rates and the extent of apparent national contextualisation.

**References**


Council of the EU (2003) *Council Conclusions [of 5 and 6 May 2003] on Reference Levels of European Average Performance in Education and Training ( Benchmarks) (8981/03).*


**Footnotes**

1 The Community Labour Force Survey is a quarterly harmonised sample survey on the situation of the labour force in Europe; it is one of the main instruments for measuring participation in education and training and educational attainment of the adult population (15-year-olds and above). The questions on participation in education have recently been updated.’ (CEC 2001b, p. 29)

2 In May 2009, the Council raised this benchmark: ‘By 2020, an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning’ (CEU 2009).


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