

Young Adults' Perspectives on Learning, Technological Change and Qualifications. Implications for Skills Policy¹

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Abstract

Technological change and globalisation are reshaping contemporary labour markets in ways that require workers to continuously update and extend their competence through learning undertaken across multiple settings and throughout the life course. Against this backdrop, the promotion of lifelong learning has become a central element of development strategies at both European Union and national level, including in Poland. Despite this policy emphasis, participation in adult skill development among school leavers in Poland remains among the lowest in Europe and has shown little improvement over the past decade, notwithstanding a substantial increase in public expenditure, particularly through the European Social Fund.

By examining young adults' attitudes towards learning, technological change and qualifications, this article seeks to explain why relatively few adults in Poland engage in the further development of their skills. The analysis explores differences in attitudes by gender,

¹ The analysis of young adults' attitudes was conducted as part of a study carried out by a research team from the SGH Warsaw School of Economics and the University of Wrocław as part of a project financed by a grant from the National Science Centre entitled "Socio-economic awareness, work experience and coping strategies of Poles in the context of the post-pandemic crisis". UMO-2020/37/B/HS6/00479. See: Czarzasty (ed.) 2022.

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age, educational attainment, labour market status, financial situation and place of residence, situating these findings within the broader context of skills policy design in Poland. Empirical evidence is drawn from a survey of 1,000 young adults conducted between April and July 2018 using face-to-face interviews with a paper questionnaire (PAPI).

Keywords: attitudes towards learning, adult learning, barriers to learning, qualifications, skills policy, Poland

JEL Classification: J24, O33, I28

Introduction

Technological change and globalisation are affecting societies and economies in unprecedented ways. These megatrends, combined with demographic developments and shifts in consumer values and preferences, are reshaping both the quantity and quality of available work, including how work is organised and by whom it is performed, now and in the future (OECD 2017).

As a consequence, many advanced economies are experiencing increasing labour-market polarisation (Frey & Osborne 2013; OECD 2017), reflected in the growth of employment at the top and bottom of the wage distribution and a simultaneous decline in medium-income jobs. At the same time, technological progress and intensified globalisation are compelling firms to engage in ongoing adaptation and restructuring, contributing to greater employment instability and insecurity.

These developments also generate growing pressure for the continuous updating and expansion of skills. According to a report by the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA 2018), nearly half of the subject knowledge acquired by first-year students in technical fields is no longer relevant by the time they graduate. Similarly, research published by the World Economic Forum (WEF 2016) suggests that, by 2020, more than one-third of occupations would require skill sets that were not previously regarded as essential. The same report estimates that around 65 per cent of children entering primary education are likely to work in occupations that do not yet exist (for a discussion, see Dębowski & Stęchły 2019).

Against this background, adult skills development has become a central component of development strategies at both European and national level. In the European

Union, initiatives such as Europe 2020 and the New Skills Agenda for Europe have placed lifelong learning at the heart of policy discourse, while in Poland similar priorities are reflected in the Strategy for Responsible Development and the Integrated Skills Strategy 2030. Comparable emphases can also be observed in the strategies of international organisations, including the United Nations' Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030 and the OECD's Education 2030 framework.

EU policies promoting lifelong learning attach particular importance to vocational education and training. Over recent decades, there has been a marked shift in policy attention away from general education – which for many years dominated the agendas of national governments, researchers and international organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank – towards the development of vocational and professional competences at later stages of the life course, including after the completion of upper-secondary and higher education (Gold 2009; Maurer & Gonon 2014; Dębowski & Stęchły 2015; Markowitsch & Dębowski 2022).

Despite this policy reorientation, Poland continues to record one of the lowest levels of adult participation in skills development through formal and non-formal education in Europe. This pattern has remained largely unchanged for more than a decade, notwithstanding a substantial increase in public expenditure, particularly through the European Social Fund. This situation constitutes a paradox of the Polish education system: Polish students achieve comparatively strong results in international assessments such as PISA and display high levels of motivation to enter higher education, yet participation in learning declines sharply once initial education is completed. Understanding why relatively few adults in Poland engage in further skills development is therefore of considerable importance for the design of effective public instruments and skills policies.

In this article, formal and non-formal education are defined in line with the classifications of the European Statistical Office (Eurostat) and the Polish Act on the Integrated Qualifications System. Formal education refers to organised education or training leading to qualifications awarded within the education or higher education system (such as vocational diplomas, secondary school-leaving certificates, or bachelor's and master's degrees). All other organised education and training activities are classified as non-formal education. Formal and non-formal education does not include informal learning, which is defined as the acquisition of knowledge, skills and social competences through a variety of activities outside organised forms of education (for a discussion, see Sławiński [ed.] 2014).

Low levels of adult participation in formal and non-formal education may be attributed to a range of obstacles or barriers. The literature commonly distinguishes four

broad categories: barriers related to individuals' life circumstances; institutional arrangements shaping incentives for individuals and employers; the availability and quality of information on education and training opportunities; and attitudes towards learning.

A substantial body of research indicates that negative attitudes towards learning constitute one of the most significant determinants of non-participation in adult education. Individuals who perceive limited need for, or benefits from, learning are unlikely to engage in educational activities. From the perspective of the theory of planned behaviour, participation requires an intention to act, which in turn depends on attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. The stronger the belief in the positive outcomes of learning, the more favourable the attitude towards participation and the greater the likelihood of engagement (Ajzen 1991).

For these reasons, this study focuses on attitudes towards learning, technological change and the perceived role of qualifications. In doing so, it seeks to address a gap in research on lifelong learning in Poland. The research design and questionnaire were developed to complement existing large-scale surveys, including the Labour Force Survey (LFS), Social Diagnosis and the Human Capital Balance Sheet. Measures of learning attitudes draw on earlier work by Cross (1981), Darkenwald and Hayes (1988), and Field (2004).

The article addresses the following research questions:

1. Do young adults recognise the need to develop their competences at later stages of life?
2. To what extent is competence acquisition approached instrumentally by young adults?
3. Do young adults perceive responsibility for skills development as primarily individual or as resting with the state?
4. Do young adults regard independent learning as more effective than organised learning with a lecturer?
5. Do young adults believe that employers value "formal" qualifications more highly than actual skills or competences?

The analysis of attitudes towards lifelong learning considers differences by age, educational attainment, labour-market status (Boudard & Rubenson 2003) and gender (Chłóń-Domińczak & Lis 2013), as well as additional factors such as respondents' financial situation, their assessment of the education system in Poland and the type of enterprise in which they are employed.

Although adult participation in formal and non-formal learning in the Mazowieckie Province is among the highest in Poland, it is characterised by pronounced territorial disparities. Participation rates in the capital region are more than five times higher than in the remainder of the province. Consequently, differences related to place of residence also warrant close attention in the analysis of learning attitudes.

The article is structured as follows. The first section reviews the literature on barriers to adult learning. The second examines patterns of participation in learning in Poland in a comparative European perspective. The third presents the results of the empirical analysis. The final section summarises the findings and discusses their implications.

Barriers and attitudes towards learning

In a rapidly changing social and economic environment, the demand for skills is in constant flux. The scale and pace of transformation in labour markets and social contexts require individuals to remain open to learning in diverse forms and settings – not only within the formal education system (lifewide learning), but also continuously across the life course, from early adulthood to old age (lifelong learning).

From a societal perspective, the average level of education and competences within the population – often conceptualised as the stock of human capital – has a direct bearing on the quality of labour resources and, consequently, on productivity and overall economic output (Grugulis et al. 2017; Desjardins 2017). High-quality human capital contributes not only to economic growth and innovation, but also to broader social outcomes, including social cohesion, the well-being of citizens beyond those with the highest levels of competence, and higher levels of interpersonal trust (Jarvis [ed.] 2009). At the individual level, investments in education are associated with tangible returns in the form of higher earnings, improved career prospects and a more secure position in the labour market, reflected, for example, in a lower risk of unemployment. Notably, the rate of return on such investments tends to be higher in societies characterised by greater income inequality (for a discussion, see Dębowski, Lis & Pogorzelski 2010).

Across OECD countries, individuals with lower levels of education are consistently in a weaker position in the labour market, both in terms of employment stability and average wages. Higher qualifications are associated with higher earnings and more secure employment trajectories, and Poland is no exception in this respect. Moreover, a substantial body of research indicates that education – particularly when extended into adulthood – is positively associated with better health outcomes (Hammond & Feinstein 2006) and higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Sabates & Hammond 2008).

The need to continuously upgrade existing competences and acquire new ones underpins contemporary conceptions of learning as a permanent feature of the life course. The traditional linear division between distinct phases of education and work has become increasingly blurred. Whereas learning was once largely confined to youth, followed by a prolonged period of labour market participation, learning today extends well beyond initial education. This implies that schooling and higher education must provide a foundation for subsequent learning, equipping individuals with the capacity to learn in diverse contexts and to manage their own development over time (Chłóń-Domińczak et al. 2013).

Given the recognised importance of learning and skills development for individuals and societies alike, a key question arises: why do participation rates in formal and non-formal adult education remain low in some countries, including Poland? Understanding the factors that shape individuals' decisions to engage – or not engage – in learning is therefore essential for the effective design and implementation of public policies aimed at social and economic development.

The literature commonly distinguishes four broad categories of barriers that constrain adult participation in learning (Cross 1981; Rubenson 2011):

- barriers related to individuals' life circumstances, such as time constraints linked to work and care responsibilities, health limitations or financial difficulties;
- institutional barriers arising from national arrangements that shape incentives for individuals and employers to invest in human capital, including the cost of training, limited availability or quality of provision, and the presence or absence of financial incentives such as scholarships or tax relief;
- informational barriers concerning access to reliable and transparent information on education and training opportunities for individuals and firms;
- barriers related to adults' attitudes towards learning.

Rubenson (2011) observes that much of the existing research concentrates on situational and institutional barriers, while attitudinal barriers remain comparatively under-explored. At the same time, international comparative studies suggest that negative attitudes and unfavourable learning mindsets may play a crucial role in explaining low levels of adult participation in skills development (Roosmaa & Saar 2017). Importantly, institutional and informational barriers can themselves shape attitudes towards learning and thereby influence final educational decisions (Rubenson 2018). Such barriers often reflect prevailing systems of industrial relations and the broader configuration of the welfare state in a given country. For this reason, public policy interventions aimed at increasing participation in adult learning need to address not

only individual motivation but also the institutional context that constrains learning opportunities (Roosmaa & Saar 2017).

Similar conclusions emerged from a series of public debates and consultation meetings organised by the Educational Research Institute in the context of developing an integrated qualifications system and the Polish Qualifications Framework. Participants – including experts and social partners – identified individual motivation as the primary barrier to adult learning, followed by constraints related to the training market and the broader institutional and legal environment (Chłóń-Domińczak et al. 2011). Challenges associated with the functioning of the qualifications system and with assuring the quality of training provision have also been highlighted in subsequent analyses (Sławiński & Dębowski [eds.] 2013; Worek et al. 2015), as well as in strategic policy documents such as the Integrated Skills Strategy 2030 (MEN 2020).

Adult learning in Poland compared to other European countries

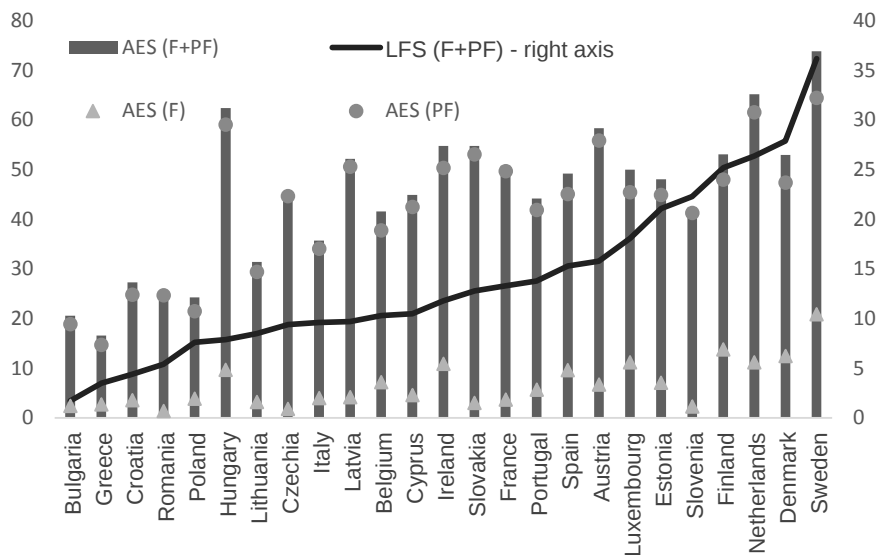
Despite the relatively high level of general education among the population aged 25–64, including a high share of individuals with tertiary education, Poland is characterised by low levels of participation in adult learning compared with other European countries. When these indicators are taken into account, Poland falls within the same cluster as Greece, Romania, Lithuania and Croatia (Żurawski 2019). At the same time, Poland differs from these countries in that its students achieve comparatively strong results in international competence assessments, including PISA (Sitek [ed.] 2019).

Evidence from Eurostat surveys – most notably the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the Adult Education Survey (AES) and the Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) – confirms that Poland ranks among the lowest-performing countries in Europe with respect to adult participation in both formal and non-formal education. The principal weakness of the Polish system lies in the particularly low incidence of non-formal education, such as short courses and training programmes, which tend to offer more flexible forms of skills development (Worek et al. 2015; Worek 2019). In addition, a substantially smaller proportion of adults in Poland than the EU average report engaging in informal learning, understood as learning undertaken through activities outside organised educational settings.

As in other European countries, participation in learning increases as the degree of institutionalisation and formalisation decreases. According to the AES,

around 4 per cent of adults in Poland participate in formal education within a twelve-month reference period, approximately 21.5 per cent engage in non-formal education, and 47.7 per cent report involvement in informal learning (see also Petelewicz et al. 2023).

Figure 1. Participation in formal and non-formal education among adults (aged 25-64) in 2022 according to the LFS and AES surveys.



Explanations:

AES (F+PF) – participation in formal (F) and non-formal (PF) education according to the Adult Education Survey, i.e. within 12 months of the survey.

LFS – participation in formal (F) and non-formal (PF) education according to the Labour Force Survey, i.e. during the 4 weeks preceding the survey.

Source: Own elaboration based on LFS and AES surveys, Eurostat.

The highest levels of adult participation in formal and non-formal education are observed in the Scandinavian countries, where more than one-fifth of the population aged over 25 engages in skills development. Among the newer EU Member States, participation rates are highest in Slovenia (22.3 per cent) and Estonia (21.1 per cent). It should be noted, however, that estimates of participation vary depending on the survey instrument used. Data from the Adult Education Survey (AES) suggest that Hungary and Slovakia record participation rates comparable to those observed in the Scandinavian countries, as well as in Estonia and Slovenia.

Across almost all European countries, women are more likely than men to participate in education and training. On average, the gender gap in participation in the EU-27 amo-

unts to approximately 2.6 percentage points. The largest differences are observed in the Scandinavian countries, where participation rates among women exceed those of men by around 10 percentage points. In Poland, women also display higher levels of engagement in further education, with gender differences broadly in line with the EU average (approximately 2–3 percentage points; see Chłoń-Domińczak & Lis 2013).

Participation in adult learning is also strongly differentiated by occupational characteristics. Further education is more common among white-collar employees in managerial and professional positions – particularly in areas such as finance, bookkeeping and accounting – as well as in occupations that require frequent use of reading, writing, numeracy and analytical skills, rather than manual labour (Boudard & Rubenson 2003). In addition, residents of urban areas and employees of firms competing on international markets are more likely to undertake training.

In Poland, participation in adult education is markedly lower among groups that are disadvantaged in the labour market, including the unemployed, individuals with low levels of occupational qualification and older workers. The predominant group engaging in further education consists of younger, highly educated individuals who are already in employment (Kocór & Worek 2017). An interesting exception to this pattern concerns adult migrants: in Poland, foreign-born adults are more likely to participate in formal and non-formal education than those born in the country. Given the scale of migration since 2014, this phenomenon warrants further investigation and may help to explain the recent increase in participation in non-formal education.

Figure 2a. Participation of people aged 25–64 in formal and non-formal education

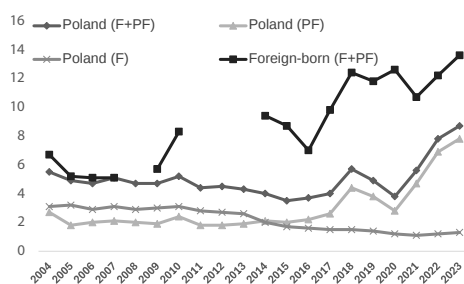
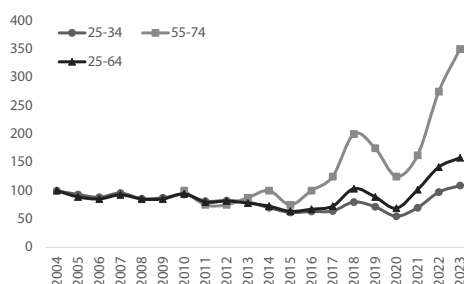


Figure 2b. Changes in participation in formal and non-formal education in different age groups, 2004 = 100.



Explanations: (F) – participation in formal education; (PF) – participation in non-formal education

Source: Own elaboration based on LFS survey, Eurostat.

The smallest differences between Poland and other EU countries are observed among individuals aged 20–34 residing in large cities (see Table 1). Large urban cen-

tres, by virtue of their employment structures, concentration of educational institutions and presence of research and innovation hubs, generate sustained demand for highly skilled labour. From an individual perspective, this translates into relatively high returns on investment in human capital. At the same time, urban residents – who on average enjoy higher incomes than those living in small towns or rural areas – face fewer financial constraints on education and benefit from significantly better access to a wide range of educational and training services.

It is also worth noting that, according to data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), which measures participation in education and training in the four weeks preceding the survey, adult participation in Poland has increased across all age groups and types of locality since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. This growth has been driven primarily by rising participation in non-formal education, accompanied by a decline in participation in formal education. By contrast, evidence from the Adult Education Survey (AES), which captures learning activities undertaken over the previous twelve months, indicates that overall participation in adult education has remained broadly stable compared with earlier years, with non-formal education continuing to dominate over formal forms of learning.

Table 1. Learners (in formal and non-formal education) four weeks prior to the survey, broken down by age and place of residence in Poland and in selected EU27 countries (in per cent) in 2023 and 2019*.

	Age 20–34			Age 25–64		
	large cities (<i>cities</i>)	small towns (<i>towns</i>)	rural areas	large cities (<i>cities</i>)	small towns (<i>towns</i>)	rural areas
Poland	30.7 (25.0)*	22.5 (15.1)	19.3 (13.2)	13.5 (8.1)	7.1 (4.0)	5.2 (2.4)
France	36.1 (37.6)	28.0 (33.3)	23.1 (25.9)	16.5 (21.2)	14.3 (20.0)	13 (17.1)
Germany	34.6 (36.3)	24.8 (26.1)	21.7 (22.4)	10.9 (10.9)	6.9 (7.0)	5.5 (6.0)
Denmark	54.8 (51.0)	41.1 (39.6)	34.5 (35.5)	36.1 (29.6)	28.8 (23.8)	25.9 (22.4)
Slovenia	46.8 (36.2)	39.4 (29.1)	39.9 (27.2)	25.3 (14.6)	19.6 (10.2)	18.1 (10.5)
EU27	36.4 (32.7)	28.5 (25.1)	23.3 (20.3)	15.7 (11.5)	11.3 (8.1)	9.7 (6.8)

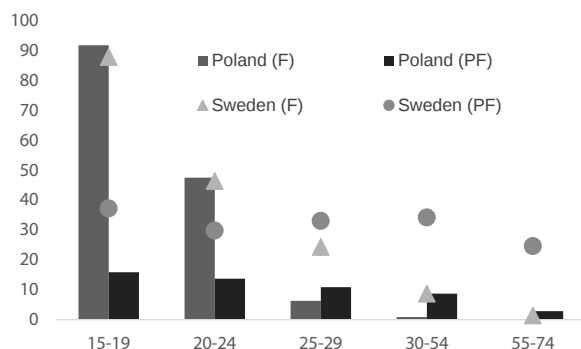
* Data in brackets and italics (...) refer to data for 2019

Source: Own elaboration based on LFS survey, Eurostat.

Participation in formal and non-formal education in Poland declines markedly with age. Among individuals aged 15–24, participation rates in both formal and non-formal education are among the highest in the European Union, at 92 per cent and 15.9 per cent respectively, compared with EU-27 averages of 89.6 per cent and 13.5 per cent. Beyond the age of 30, however, participation in formal education in Poland falls to almost zero. As a result, adults over 30 engage in learning almost exclusively through non-formal routes, a pattern consistently documented in Eurostat surveys (LFS and AES) as well as in national studies, particularly those conducted under the Human Capital Balance Sheet (BKL) project of the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) and by the Educational Research Institute (IBE) (see, *inter alia*, Worek 2019; Czarnik et al. 2022; Petelewicz et al. 2023).

A comparison of participation patterns in Poland and Sweden across age groups yields further insights. In the 15–19 age group, participation in formal education is slightly higher in Poland than in Sweden, whereas participation in non-formal education in Sweden (37.3 per cent) is more than twice as high as in Poland (13.5 per cent). In older age cohorts, participation in formal education declines in both countries, although the decline is considerably more gradual in Sweden. A key distinguishing feature of the Swedish model is the persistently high level of participation in non-formal education, which remains at approximately 20–30 per cent even among individuals aged over 55.

Figure 3. Participation in formal and non-formal education in Poland (marked with bars) and Sweden (marked with dots) in 2023



Source: Own elaboration based on LFS survey, Eurostat.

Non-formal education is provided through a diverse range of channels. It may be delivered by private training institutions operating outside the education and higher education system, through short courses and training programmes, or via training organised by employers. In addition, non-formal education can be offered by institu-

tions formally embedded within the education and higher education system, such as vocational skills courses, MBA programmes and other forms of provision that do not lead to full formal qualifications.

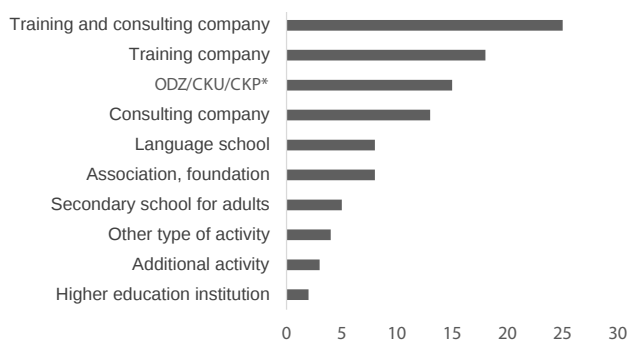
Analysis of data from the Adult Education Survey (AES) indicates that, over the period 2007–2022, the structure of non-formal education provision in Poland has been dominated by training institutions operating outside the formal education system, while the role of employers has remained relatively limited. Notably, this pattern has shown little change since 2007. The findings from the most recent round of the AES are corroborated by national research conducted by the Educational Research Institute (IBE) during a similar period (see Petelewicz et al. 2023 for further details).

Table 2. Distribution of non-formal education provision by training providers

Year	2007	2011	2016	2022
Poland				
Formal education institutions	13.1	11.9	8.6	9.8
Non-formal education institutions, including other institutions offering training	62.3	69.05	65.3	62.9
Employers	20.8	16.8	23.2	18.7
Individuals	3.8	1.7	2.4	4.2
Slovakia				
Formal education institutions	17.0	11.0	8.5	2.0
Non-formal education institutions, including other institutions offering training	40.4	38.7	38.3	27
Employers	40.0	47.5	48.8	58.2
Individuals	1.8	2.9	3.6	12.4
Sweden				
Formal education institutions	4.2	7.5	9.8	5.8
Non-formal education institutions, including other institutions offering training	47.2	58.4	45.9	46.3
Employers	45.5	30.1	32.9	31.2
Individuals	2.5	3.1	6.1	3.2

Source: Own elaboration based on AES research, Eurostat.

Evidence from the Human Capital Balance Sheet (Bilans Kapitału Ludzkiego, BKL) survey indicates that more than 86 per cent of entities operating in the non-formal education market are private providers, an increase from 82 per cent in 2017. Public providers account for around 7 per cent of the sector, down from 11 per cent in 2017, with the remaining share made up primarily of non-governmental organisations.

Figure 4. Types of entities in the training and development services sector in 2021

* Professional development centre / Continuing education centre / Practical training centre

Source: Górniak, Kubica, et al. (2022) – BKL. Training and development sector survey

Employer involvement constitutes a crucial element of the lifelong learning system. In this respect, developed economies have undergone a substantial transformation over the past four decades. In the late 1970s, only a small proportion of firms chose to finance employee education or organise training activities. For example, in Sweden and the United Kingdom – countries that today record some of the highest levels of adult participation in learning – no more than 15 per cent of firms were engaged in such activities at that time, a figure almost three and a half times lower than current levels (Boudard & Rubenson 2003; see also Dębowski et al. 2010).

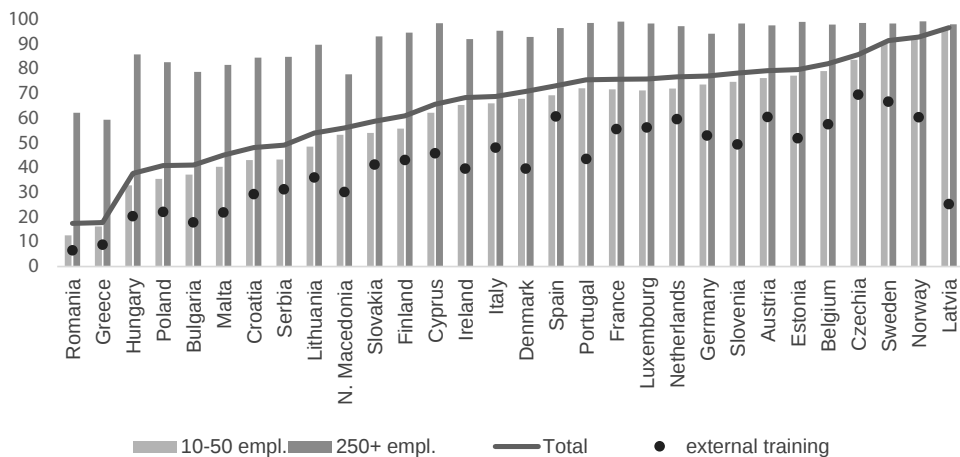
In Poland, employer involvement in the development of employees' qualifications remains considerably lower than the European average, particularly with regard to both in-house and externally provided training. In 2020, training activities were reported in only around 40 per cent of Polish enterprises, compared with an EU-27 average of 67.4 per cent. Among large enterprises employing at least 250 workers, the gap is narrower but remains substantial: 83 per cent of such firms in Poland reported organising training for their employees, compared with 93 per cent across the EU-27.

Polish enterprises are also significantly less likely to commission training from external providers. In 2020, only 22.1 per cent of firms in Poland reported outsourcing training, compared with an EU average of 46.8 per cent. Notably, even in countries characterised by advanced production systems and strong employer involvement in initial vocational education and training – such as Germany, Austria and Norway – more than half of enterprises report using external training providers.

Moreover, employers in Poland play a relatively limited role as sources of information about training opportunities. According to the Continuing Vocational Tra-

ining Survey (CVTS), only 16 per cent of adult employees in Poland who participated in formal or non-formal education indicated that their employer was an important source of information when searching for training opportunities. This compares with an EU-27 average of 27 per cent, and much higher figures in countries such as France (46.9 per cent) and Slovakia (30.5 per cent).

Figure 5. Percentage of enterprises involved in organising training at the workplace, broken down by number of employees, in 2020



Source: Own study based on Eurostat (CVT Survey).

Among Polish enterprises that make use of training services offered by external providers, the majority rely on private training institutions, while formal education institutions – such as schools, training centres and universities – play an increasingly marginal role (see Table 3). As noted by Winnicka-Weiss (2018, p. 69), the situation differs markedly across the European Union, where training services are much more frequently provided by a broader range of actors, including employers' organisations and chambers of commerce, non-commercial institutions, non-profit non-governmental organisations and trade unions.

Table 3. Providers of externally organised training for company employees, 2020 (per cent)*

	Private companies	Formal education institutions	Publicly funded institutions	Private companies whose core business is not training	Employers' organisations Chambers of commerce and industry	Trade unions
France	87.0	14.3	11.9	12.7	9.0	0.4
North Macedonia	84.6	8.3	8.7	15.0	18.1	1.9
Slovakia	83.1	7.2	10.0	32.3	9.0	2.7
Norway	80.6	19.7	7.6	49.6	32.8	5.3
Finland	77.7	19.7	24.3	31.0	25.5	5.3
Italy	76.2	4.5	13.9	17.9	16.1	2.0
Sweden	73.8	2.6	2.0	21.1	29.9	5.8
Spain	71.9	6.8	2.0	21.0	12.4	0.9
Poland**	71.4 (76.6)	10.8 (17.7)	12.4 (17.6)	28.4 (33.4)	14.7 (24.2)	0.2 (1.5)
Netherlands	71.0	12.6	20.8	26.8	4.4	1.1
Portugal	69.2	11.8	9.9	41.1	17.0	3.3
Czech Republic	68.9	2.4	1.7	17.8	5.4	1.1
Greece	68.5	25.0	13.9	32.1	6.0	1.6
EU-27	68.4	9.7	12.1	24.0	22.8	2.8
Cyprus	67.5	11.4	30.8	17.5	15.2	1.1
Hungary	66.3	16.2	6.2	13.6	12.0	0.6
Latvia	65.9	8.2	14.2	17.8	21.9	2.1
Belgium	65.5	21.9	31.6	15.5	28.6	2.5
Luxembourg	65.1	8.7	28.1	24.9	35.7	0.8
Ireland	62.2	17.5	8.4	6.3	12.5	0.9
Serbia	61.8	8.3	8.8	20.4	15.1	0.5
Denmark	61.7	17.9	37.6	17.5	16.1	8.0
Bulgaria	55.2	9.7	16.2	18.9	12.9	0.8
Lithuania	53.5	8.6	11.1	15.3	14.8	1.0
Germany	51.0	7.3	9.4	36.5	51.5	6.0
Slovenia	48.1	10.5	12.0	38.5	29.1	-
Austria	44.8	12.3	23.1	38.4	42.8	10.1
Estonia	42.0	17.7	54.5	10.6	17.5	-

* The figures do not add up to 100 per cent because respondents could give more than one answer.

** For Poland, the figures in brackets indicate the values for 2011.

Source: Own elaboration based on CVTS, Eurostat.

Young adults' attitudes towards learning: survey results

This article presents the results of an analysis based on data from a survey entitled *Young people on the labour market in the Mazovia Province*, conducted using face-to-face interviews with a paper questionnaire (PAPI).

The survey was carried out on a representative sample of individuals born between 1987 and 1999 and residing in the Mazovia Province. It covered 139 municipalities and employed a quota sampling design to ensure that the distribution of key socio-demographic characteristics – such as age, gender, educational attainment, occupational status and place of residence – closely reflected the actual population structure. The sampling framework was based on data from the Central Statistical Office for the Mazovia Province. The final sample comprised 1,000 respondents ($N = 1,000$), including 505 men and 495 women, mirroring the gender distribution within the relevant age cohort. As Gardawski (2022) observes, the Mazowieckie Province may be described as “Poland in a nutshell”, as it encompasses both the highly developed metropolitan area of Warsaw and surrounding districts, as well as regions characterised by comparatively low levels of socio-economic development.

Overall, the surveyed young adults display predominantly positive attitudes towards lifelong learning. A total of 77.7 per cent of respondents agree – of whom 34.2 per cent strongly agree – that learning in later stages of life, after completion of initial education, significantly increases one's chances of success in life, while only 2 per cent clearly disagree with this statement. At the same time, as many as 71.4 per cent of respondents agree that developing skills makes sense only insofar as they are useful in the labour market, with 11.4 per cent expressing disagreement. These responses point to a largely utilitarian and instrumental orientation towards skills development.

By contrast, fewer than half of respondents (49 per cent) agree that technological change necessitates continued learning and skills development in later stages of life, while 26.8 per cent disagree. This pattern may reflect the uneven and sector-specific impact of technological change on the Polish labour market, which may not yet have been fully internalised by young adults.

A clear majority of respondents indicate that responsibility for developing skills lies primarily with individuals themselves rather than with the state (78.6 per cent). Almost half of the respondents (44.4 per cent) believe that competences can be developed more effectively through self-directed learning than through organised training with a lecturer, and 49.9 per cent consider that employers value employees' competences more highly than their formal qualifications, such as certificates and diplomas. These views

may help to explain why participation in organised forms of adult education remains limited despite generally positive attitudes towards the value of learning. This issue is discussed in greater detail in the concluding section of the article.

It is also noteworthy that a substantial majority of respondents (73.1 per cent) believe that a university degree continues to be highly valued in the labour market, suggesting a relatively accurate understanding of recruitment practices in Poland. On the one hand, respondents perceive competences – regardless of formal certification – as important for employers; on the other, they recognise that higher education credentials are often required in recruitment processes.

The following sections examine variations in attitudes towards learning by educational attainment, gender, labour market status, financial situation and place of residence.

Table 4. Attitudes of young adults towards learning, technological change and qualifications (in %)

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Do you agree with the statement: Learning in later stages of life, after completing school education, significantly increases the chances of success in life?	34.2	43.5	13	6.8	2.3
Do you agree with the statement: Developing your skills only makes sense if it is useful in the labour market?	25.0	46.3	17.4	8	3.2
Do you agree with the statement: Technological changes do not necessitate learning and developing competences in later stages of life, after completing school education?	6.9	19.9	24.2	29.6	19.4
Do you agree with the statement: Every person is responsible for adapting their skills to changes in the labour market?	26.4	52.2	15.2	5	1.2
Do you agree with the statement: Responsibility for adapting the skills of adults to changes in the labour market lies primarily with the state?	7.6	27.7	26.0	24.3	14.5

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Do you agree with the statement: By learning independently, you can develop your skills better than during organised training with a lecturer?	14.4	30	34.5	16.3	4.8
Do you agree with the statement: Employers value a person's skills more than their certificates, diplomas and degrees?	17.4	32.5	37.7	8.7	3.8

Source: PAPI 2018.

Differences in attitudes based on gender and age

Gender does not appear to differentiate attitudes towards learning. Women and men respond in an almost identical manner to each of the questions presented in Table 4. These attitudinal patterns are broadly consistent with observed participation rates: among individuals aged 20–34 in Poland, a similar proportion of men (16.3 per cent) and women (19.8 per cent) engage in learning activities. The slightly higher participation rate among women is largely attributable to structural factors, notably the concentration of training provision in large enterprises and in non-market service sectors such as education, health and social care, which are strongly feminised in the Polish context.

Age likewise does not substantially differentiate respondents' attitudes towards learning. For most items reported in Table 4, the proportions of respondents expressing agreement or disagreement are very similar across age groups, irrespective of whether individuals are aged 20, 25 or over 30. This finding is noteworthy given that a significant share of individuals aged 20–25 remain in education and are therefore economically inactive.

An exception concerns attitudes towards self-directed learning. Respondents aged 19–22 are less likely to agree (38 per cent) that self-directed learning is a more effective way of developing skills than organised training with a lecturer, compared with respondents in older age groups (47 per cent). This difference may reflect greater familiarity with institutionalised forms of learning among those who are still closely connected to the formal education system.

Differences in attitudes based on education

A substantial body of international research demonstrates that educational attainment is a key determinant of participation in adult learning (Belanger & Tuijnman 1997; Kern et al. 2009; Desjardins 2017). This relationship has also been confirmed in studies conducted in Poland (Szcucka et al. 2012; Kocór & Worek 2017). In general, higher levels of education are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in skills development at later stages of life. As discussed in earlier sections, participation in both formal and non-formal education in Poland is markedly higher among individuals with tertiary education and those who are employed than among those with lower levels of education and/or those who are economically inactive.

The findings of the present study confirm that educational attainment differentiates attitudes towards learning, although the magnitude of these differences is smaller than might be expected given the pronounced disparities observed in actual participation in continuing education. Particularly noteworthy are the differences in attitudes between respondents holding a master's degree and those with a bachelor's or engineering degree, as well as the more divergent responses – limited to certain questions – among individuals with basic vocational or primary education (see Table 5).

Respondents with a master's degree express the strongest agreement with the view that learning in later stages of life, after the completion of initial education, substantially increases the chances of success in life. At the same time, they are most likely to disagree with the statement that skills development is meaningful only when it yields direct labour-market benefits. Notably, respondents rejecting this utilitarian view of learning are predominantly residents of Warsaw. This suggests that individuals with a master's degree living in the capital city tend to value learning for personal development and self-realisation, rather than primarily as a means of advancing their professional careers.

Respondents holding a bachelor's degree display attitudes similar to those of individuals with general secondary or vocational secondary education. No meaningful differences are observed between graduates of technical colleges and general secondary schools. By contrast, the least favourable attitudes towards learning are found among individuals with post-secondary education – although this group is small in the sample ($N = 37$) – as well as among those with vocational and basic education.

Graduates of technical colleges exhibit the highest level of awareness of the impact of technological change on competence requirements. This may reflect their more frequent engagement in routine tasks in industrial and service occupations,

where the effects of technological change and globalisation are experienced more directly in everyday work (Hardy, Keister & Lewandowski 2016).

Finally, responses to questions concerning the acquisition of competences and qualifications are broadly similar across age groups, indicating that educational attainment, rather than age per se, plays a more salient role in shaping attitudes towards learning.

Table 5. Attitudes of young adults towards learning, technological change and qualifications by level of education of respondents (in %)

Persons who have completed a given type of school/have a given level of education	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>Do you agree with the statement: Continuing education after completing school significantly increases the chances of success in life?</i>					
– primary education	30.1	40.9	23.7	5.4	0.0
– basic vocational education (3 years)	18.9	51.5	16.7	10.6	2.3
– general upper secondary education	40.4	38.1	10.8	6.2	4.6
– vocational upper secondary education (technikum schools, 5 years)	32.2	47.2	11.7	5.6	3.3
– post-secondary education	27.3	39.4	24.2	9.1	0
– Bachelor's degree/Engineer	41.0	35.2	12.4	9.5	1.9
– Master's degree	37.9	48.5	8.6	5.1	0.0
<i>Do you agree with the statement: Developing your skills only makes sense if it is useful in the labour market?</i>					
– primary education	17.2	48.4	22.6	7.5	4.3
– basic vocational education (3 years)	12.2	58.8	22.1	6.1	0.8
– general upper secondary education	25.5	45.6	18.5	6.6	3.9
– vocational upper secondary education (technikum schools, 5 years)	26.3	45.8	19.0	5.0	3.9
– post-secondary education	30.3	36.4	21.2	12.1	0
– Bachelor's degree/Engineer	33.7	39.4	14.4	8.7	3.8
– Master's degree	30.3	44.9	9.1	13.1	2.5
<i>Do you agree with the statement: Every person is responsible for adapting their skills to changes in the labour market?</i>					
– primary education	23.7	57	17.2	2.2	0.0
– basic vocational education (3 years)	15.8	54.9	19.5	8.3	1.5
– general upper secondary education	25.1	50.2	18.5	4.6	1.5
– vocational upper secondary education (technikum schools, 5 years)	26.1	54.4	12.8	5.6	1.1
– post-secondary education	27.3	36.4	21.2	9.1	6.1
– Bachelor's degree/Engineer	38.1	41.0	13.3	5.7	1.9
– Master's degree	30.5	56.9	9.1	3.6	0.0

Persons who have completed a given type of school/have a given level of education	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>Do you agree with the statement: Technological changes do not necessitate learning and developing competences in later stages of life, after completing school education?</i>					
– primary education	9.7	23.7	22.6	32.3	11.8
– basic vocational education (3 years)	6.8	24.1	27.8	27.1	14.3
– general upper secondary education	6.9	20.5	24.3	25.5	22.8
– vocational upper secondary education (technikum schools, 5 years)	5.0	15.1	22.9	36.3	20.7
– post-secondary education	5.9	20.6	23.5	23.5	26.5
– Bachelor's degree/Engineer	9.5	19.0	21.0	31.4	19.0
– Master's degree	6.6	19.7	25.3	29.3	19.2

Source: PAPI 2018.

Attitudes towards learning are only weakly associated with assessments of the quality of education. As noted elsewhere in this article, young adults in Poland evaluate the education system relatively positively: 57 per cent of respondents rate it favourably, while 17 per cent express a negative assessment. Importantly, even respondents who assess the quality of education poorly, or who do not hold a clear opinion, tend to express positive attitudes towards lifelong learning (see Table 6).

Respondents who evaluate education positively are also more likely to indicate that self-directed learning enables more effective skills development than organised training with a lecturer. Overall, however, the findings suggest no clear correlation between perceptions of educational quality and attitudes towards independent learning. This pattern may indicate that unfavourable experiences in formal schooling do not necessarily translate into negative attitudes towards learning in adulthood. It is also worth noting that assessments of the education system are marginally more favourable among graduates of secondary schools and technical colleges than among university graduates.

Table 6. Attitudes towards learning and assessments of the quality of education in Poland (in %)

Assessment of the state of education in Poland	Learning at later stages of life, after completing school education, significantly increases the chances of success in life		
	I agree	Difficult to say	I disagree
Very poor*	83.3	12.5	4
Somewhat bad	73.1	15.2	11.7
Neither bad nor good	76.3	14.6	9.2

Assessment of the state of education in Poland	Learning at later stages of life, after completing school education, significantly increases the chances of success in life		
	I agree	Difficult to say	I disagree
Rather good	77.9	11.2	10.9
Very good	84.9	13.2	1.9

* Note: small number of respondents (n = 24)

Source: PAPI 2018.

Differences in attitudes based on labour market status

Labour market status clearly differentiates attitudes towards learning, particularly when comparing employed and unemployed individuals. Employed respondents exhibit more positive attitudes towards skills development than both unemployed and economically inactive persons across all variables reported in Table 7. Among those in employment, 77 per cent agree that learning in later stages of life increases the chances of success, compared with 69 per cent among the unemployed and 74.4 per cent and 75.5 per cent among economically inactive individuals and students, respectively. A similarly pronounced difference between employed and unemployed respondents is evident with respect to perceptions of responsibility for skills development: 81 per cent of employed individuals believe that responsibility for acquiring new skills rests primarily with the individual rather than the state, compared with 73 per cent among the unemployed.

More generally, employees tend to perceive skills as more highly valued by employers than formal credentials. Almost half of employed respondents (48 per cent) agree that employers place greater value on competences than on certificates, diplomas or degrees, while 12 per cent disagree and 40 per cent express no clear opinion. These attitudes do not vary systematically according to whether respondents are employed in the public or private sector.

Employer provision of training emerges as an important differentiating factor. Employees working in organisations that offer training display markedly more positive attitudes towards learning. They are also more likely to agree that individuals bear primary responsibility for adapting their skills to labour market change and, crucially, to believe that employers value competences more highly than formal qualifications. As noted elsewhere in the article, firms that invest in employee training also tend to promote teamwork and foster cooperative workplace environments. This suggests that organisational contexts that actively support skills development may play a significant role in shaping employees' attitudes towards learning.

Table 7. Attitudes towards learning and the organisation of training in the workplace (in %)

	At your main place of work: Are employees trained or retrained at the employer's expense?			
		I agree	Difficult to say	I disagree
Learning in later stages of life, after completing school education, significantly increases the chances of success in life	I agree	88.9	8.1	0.6
	Difficult to say	72.9	16.7	2.1
	I disagree	52.6	25.3	3.2
Do you agree with the statement: Every person is responsible for adapting their skills to changes in the labour market?	I agree	87.5	10.3	0.3
	Difficult to say	70.4	15.3	2
	I disagree	64.2	25.3	1.1
Do employers value a person's skills more than their certificates, diplomas and degrees?	I agree	55.2	37.3	2
	Difficult to say	39.8	43.9	6.1
	I disagree	35.8	40.0	8.4

Source: PAPI 2018.

It is also noteworthy that employees working in firms equipped with modern machinery and equipment exhibit a greater awareness of the need to update and develop their skills in response to technological change than employees in other enterprises (see Table 8).

Table 8. Attitudes towards learning and technological changes and the availability of modern machinery and tools at the workplace (in %)

At your main place of work: does the workplace/institution have modern machinery and equipment?	Do you agree with the statement: Technological changes do not necessitate learning and developing competences at later stages of life, after completing school education?		
	I agree	Difficult to say	I disagree
I strongly agree	19.2	15.4	63.5
Somewhat agree	28.9	20.6	49.0
Neither agree nor disagree	28.8	26.9	42.3
Somewhat disagree	29.4	27.6	33.3
Strongly disagree*	13	21.9	60.9

* Note: small number of respondents (n = 24)

Source: PAPI 2018.

Differences in attitudes based on financial situation

Financial situation does not appear to be a strong differentiating factor with respect to attitudes towards learning. Respondents who report being in a good financial situation display the most positive attitudes towards learning (83 per cent), yet the share of respondents in a difficult financial situation expressing positive attitudes is only modestly lower, at 76 per cent. Moreover, a substantial majority of respondents experiencing financial difficulty (76 per cent) agree that responsibility for developing skills should rest primarily with individuals themselves rather than being shifted onto the state (see Table 9).

Table 9. Attitudes towards learning and financial situation (in %)

Attitudes towards learning		Financial situation		
		We live comfortably on our current income	We manage with our current income	We are struggling to get by on our current income
Learning at later stages of life, after completing school education, significantly increases the chances of success in life	I agree	83	73	76
	Difficult to say	13	15	15
	I disagree	4	12	9
Each person is responsible for adapting their skills to changes in the labour market.	I agree	81	79	76
	Difficult to say	9	15	11
	I disagree	8	5	10

Source: PAPI 2018.

Differences in attitudes based on place of residence

In Poland, among individuals aged 20–34, residents of large cities display the highest propensity to participate in learning, while differences between smaller towns and rural areas are statistically insignificant (Dębowski, Lis & Pogorzelski 2010). In the case of the Mazovia region, Warsaw and its surrounding municipalities stand out in terms of participation in both formal and non-formal education, with the highest share of individuals in the country engaging in skills development after completing initial schooling.

The analysis of attitudes towards learning broadly mirrors these participation patterns. Residents of Warsaw exhibit the most positive attitudes towards learning, although these attitudes do not differ markedly from those observed among residents of smaller towns (with up to 50,000 inhabitants) and rural areas. Notably, however,

Warsaw residents are the least likely – compared with other categories of locality – to agree with the statement that developing skills makes sense only if it yields direct labour-market benefits. This suggests a comparatively weaker instrumental orientation towards learning among residents of the capital city.

More pronounced differences emerge when examining specific medium-sized cities within the region. The attitudes of residents of Radom, Siedlce and Ostrołęka differ noticeably from those observed elsewhere. In these cities, awareness of the need for continued learning is substantially lower: in Radom, only 53.7 per cent of respondents agree that learning is important for personal development; in Siedlce, the corresponding figure is 66.7 per cent; and in Ostrołęka, none of the respondents expressed agreement with this statement. By contrast, agreement reaches 100 per cent in Pruszków and Legionowo, and 85.7 per cent in Płock. As a consequence, residents of cities with populations between 50,000 and 500,000 are, on average, the least likely among all groups to agree that competences should be continuously developed and that individuals themselves should bear responsibility for adapting their skills to labour market change.

Table 10. Attitudes of young adults towards learning and qualifications by place of residence of respondents (in %)

	I agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
<i>Do you agree with the statement: Learning at later stages of life, after completing school education, significantly increases the chances of success in life?</i>			
Rural	79.2	12.7	8.1
Town with up to 50,000 inhabitants	76.6	14.1	9.3
City with 50,000 to 500,000 inhabitants	65.7	20.0	14.3
City with over 500,000 inhabitants	81.2	10.0	8.9
<i>Do you agree with the statement: Developing your skills only makes sense if it is useful in the labour market?</i>			
Rural	74.2	14.6	11.2
Town with up to 50,000 inhabitants	73.8	15.0	11.2
City with 50,000 to 500,000 inhabitants	72.6	20.8	6.6
City with a population of over 500,000 inhabitants	64.6	22.5	12.9

	I agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
<i>Do you agree with the statement: Every person is responsible for adapting their skills to changes in the labour market?</i>			
Rural	78.8	16.9	4.3
Town with up to 50,000 inhabitants	80.0	12.2	7.8
City with 50,000 to 500,000 inhabitants	72.1	13.5	14.4
City with a population of over 500,000 inhabitants	79.7	15.5	4.8
<i>Do you agree with the statement: Employers value a person's skills more than their certificates, diplomas and degrees?</i>			
Rural	54.9	32.9	12.2
Town with up to 50,000 inhabitants	42.4	41.4	16.3
City with 50,000 to 500,000 inhabitants	40.4	45.2	14.4
City with a population of over 500,000 inhabitants	51.5	39.6	8.9

Source: PAPI 2018.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that young adults in Poland generally hold positive attitudes towards skills development in later stages of life. A total of 77.7 per cent of respondents agree that learning after the completion of initial education significantly increases the chances of success in life, while only 2 per cent express clear disagreement. A substantial majority of respondents (78.6 per cent) also indicate that responsibility for skills development should rest primarily with individuals themselves, with only 1.2 per cent strongly rejecting this view. These positive attitudes towards learning are broadly consistent with young adults' favourable assessments of the quality of education and training received at school or university, as discussed in earlier sections of the article.

At the same time, attitudes towards learning among young adults are strongly shaped by a utilitarian and instrumental orientation. More than 71 per cent of respondents agree that skills development makes sense only insofar as it yields labour-market benefits, while only around 10 per cent disagree with this statement. This pattern contrasts sharply with findings from other contexts: for example, a survey conducted in Nor-

thern Ireland reported that only 36 per cent of respondents endorsed such an instrumental view, while over half rejected it (Field 2004). The Polish case therefore appears distinctive in the strength of its labour-market-centred understanding of learning.

Attitudes towards learning do not vary substantially by age or gender, whereas educational attainment and labour market status emerge as more salient differentiating factors. The most positive attitudes are observed among respondents holding a master's degree, while the least positive are found among individuals with basic vocational education. Importantly, however, differences in attitudes by educational level are considerably smaller than differences observed in actual participation in continuing education. Employment status plays a more pronounced role: employed individuals consistently display more positive attitudes towards learning than unemployed and economically inactive respondents across all analysed dimensions. These attitudes do not differ systematically according to whether individuals are employed in the public or private sector.

Just under half of respondents (49 per cent) recognise that technological change necessitates continued skills development, while over one quarter disagree and nearly one quarter express no clear opinion. This distribution may reflect the uneven exposure of Polish enterprises and sectors to technological change. Awareness of the skills implications of technological transformation is highest among employees working in firms equipped with modern technologies and among graduates of technical colleges, who are more likely to experience the direct effects of technological change in their everyday work.

Employer involvement in training emerges as a particularly important factor shaping attitudes towards learning. Employees working in organisations that provide training report markedly more positive attitudes towards skills development. They are also more likely to believe that individuals bear responsibility for adapting their skills to labour market change and to perceive that employers value competences more highly than formal qualifications. In line with the findings of Boudard and Rubenson (2003), this suggests that workplaces offering supportive conditions for skill development and utilisation may positively influence employees' orientations towards learning.

Taken together, the findings of this study shed new light on patterns of participation in formal, non-formal and informal learning as captured by European and national statistics (Eurostat, LFS) and by other large-scale surveys (e.g. the Human Capital Balance Sheet, Social Diagnosis). The results indicate that low participation in formal and non-formal education among young adults in Poland cannot be explained by a lack of awareness of the value of learning or by predominantly negative educational experiences. Rather, a key explanatory factor appears to be the strongly instrumental orientation towards skills development: if learning does not generate tangible and relatively immediate

benefits with a current or prospective employer, it is unlikely to be undertaken, despite generally positive attitudes towards learning and towards the education system.

This observation is particularly salient in the context of the comparatively low level of employer investment in human capital in Poland, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises. As shown by Worek et al. (2015), Polish employers have often relied on a 'sieve' model of skills acquisition, preferring to recruit externally rather than invest in the development of existing employees. Where employers fail to recognise the value of upgrading their workforce's competences – or perceive training as a more costly option than recruitment – employees are unlikely to face sufficient incentives to engage in further learning.

An additional factor potentially discouraging participation in organised education is the widespread belief that competences can be developed more effectively through self-directed learning than through formal courses with a lecturer. It remains unclear to what extent this perception reflects limited awareness of available training opportunities or scepticism regarding their quality. Moreover, the prevalent belief that employers value competences more highly than formal certificates may further reduce incentives to participate in training leading to formal credentials.

These findings suggest that public policy instruments should not focus exclusively on the supply side of the training market – such as employment services and public or private training providers – but should also include measures directly supporting learners and enterprises on the demand side. In recent years, supply-side interventions have dominated skills policy in Poland, with limited effectiveness. The results of this study help to explain why: if individuals believe that self-directed learning is more effective than organised training, supply-side measures alone will fail to reach a significant share of potential learners. As a result, existing policies may overlook individuals who wish to develop their competences but face barriers to doing so outside institutionalised training formats.

Measures aimed at reducing information asymmetries, improving the quality of training provision and recognising competences acquired through self-directed learning remain justified and should be further developed (cf. MEN 2020), but they are unlikely to be sufficient on their own. Greater emphasis could be placed on instruments that support learning in the workplace and self-education outside formal employment contexts, such as education loans, tax incentives, individual learning accounts, training leave and personalised skills-development guidance (Desjardins 2017).

At the firm level, employee representation may also play a meaningful role. In countries such as Germany and Spain, training is regulated through collective

agreements in over 20 per cent of firms that provide training, while in France it represents the second most important topic in sectoral collective bargaining after wages (Ok & Tergeist 2003). Involvement of trade unions or works councils has been shown to enhance the effectiveness of continuing education (Bukowski & Dębowski 2010). In Poland, however, company-level and inter-company social dialogue rarely addresses investment in human capital (Gardawski 2009; Czarzasty 2019).

Influencing employers' training behaviour through public policy remains challenging and typically requires long time horizons. Direct subsidies to firms are often ineffective due to crowding-out effects, whereby public funding replaces rather than supplements private investment. Employers' decisions to invest in skills are shaped by broader institutional arrangements, including industrial relations and competitive market conditions (Estevez-Abe et al. 2001).

Nonetheless, recent evidence suggests a gradual increase in employer interest in vocational education and training in Poland, particularly in sectors facing acute skills shortages (Reegard & Dębowski 2020). In line with Hirschman's (1970) framework, this shift appears to be driven less by policy incentives than by the growing difficulty of filling vacancies through external recruitment (see also Benke & Rachwał 2022). This trend is also visible in the most recent round of the pan-European Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS). Whether it will persist in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic remains an open question.

Finally, it should be noted that the surveyed population is characterised by relatively favourable labour-market conditions: over 63 per cent of respondents are employed or self-employed, 19 per cent are students, and only 17 per cent are unemployed or economically inactive. Among those in employment, more than two-thirds report working in firms that finance training, and 72 per cent indicate that teamwork is encouraged in their workplace. High levels of trust and positive assessments of management are also reported. These features may partly explain the generally positive attitudes towards learning observed in the sample. Replication of the study on a nationally representative sample would be necessary to assess the extent to which these findings are specific to the Mazovia region.

Given its broad thematic scope, this study necessarily offers a limited exploration of learning attitudes. Further research would benefit from a more extensive set of attitudinal measures and from the integration of qualitative methods, in order to better capture the motivations, constraints and decision-making processes underlying adult participation in skills development in Poland.

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