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Legitimisation of non-participation in adult education and training: the situational logic of decision-making

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ABSTRACT

The study deals with strategies for legitimising non-participation in adult education and training (AET) in groups of people with the lowest levels of participation: low-educated workers, retired individuals and people on parental leave. It aims to identify and describe strategies for legitimising non-participation. Results are based on extensive qualitative research focused on mapping the situational determinants of non-participation in AET. For this purpose, a total of 53 semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed. Through generic coding procedure, four key strategies were identified: (1) commitment to lifelong learning; (2) preference of experience over theoretical knowledge; (3) preference of complete dedication and (4) mobilisation of past educational experience. Each group of adults has a distinct way of using the strategies to justify their non-participation. The findings contribute to our knowledge of situational rationality that is used in decision-making regarding participation in AET.

KEYWORDS



Adult education and training; justification of non-participation; barriers to participation; social inequality

Introduction

Although there was a worldwide increase in participation in adult education and training (AET) in the last two decades, the structure of non-participants has remained unchanged in most countries (Desjardins, 2017; Rubenson, 2018; UNESCO, 2019). Non-participants usually belong to one of the following categories: adults with low levels of education, low-skilled workers, older adults, people with disabilities and people taking care of young children. These categories of adults are among the least involved in AET, and there has also been the lowest increase in their participation (UNESCO, 2019); they exhibit insufficient access to organised learning and/or highest perception of barriers and therefore, are sometimes referred to as ‘disadvantaged groups’ (Pennacchia et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2020).

The pattern of participation in AET that researchers identified over the last two decades persists (Desjardins, 2015; Desjardins et al., 2006; Hovdhaugen & Opheim, 2018). This pattern is visible from Table 1. below, which summarise differences in participation according to age, education and socioeconomic status in Europe from 2006 onwards.

According to UNESCO (2019, 2020), non-participation in AET is a significant social problem, as every adult should have the opportunity to participate in further education and the ensuing benefits. In the spirit of the concept of social justice (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2017), adults should have a chance to engage in activities that can enable them to change their life situation for the better. According to several studies, AET contributes not only to increasing individuals’ employability in

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Table 1. Participation in AET in European Union (27 countries).

	2005	2010	2015	2020
Participation of adults (25–64 years)	7.7	7.8	10.1	9.2
Participation of adults with ISCED 02 and lower (25–64 years)	2.6	3.2	4.0	3.4
Participation of adults (55–74 years)	2.3	2.8	4.3	3.5
Participation of adults outside the labour force	6.2	6.6	8.1	7.7

Data: Labour Force Survey (2021). Participation the period of four weeks before the survey. Data in per cents.

the labour market (Campbell, 2012; Laal & Salamati, 2012) but also to higher levels of civic engagement (Manninen & Merilainen, 2011) and quality of life (Field, 2012; Sabates & Hammond, 2008).

These positive effects are essential given the challenges faced by contemporary societies. According to a CEDEFOP (2018) analysis, around 48% of all new jobs in Europe in the next decade will require at least tertiary level of education. At the same time, de-industrialisation accompanied by the introduction of artificial intelligence leads to destabilisation of labour market, disappearance of professions, emergence of new sectors and especially obsolescence of existing skills (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Iversen & Soskice, 2019; Markowitsch & Hefler, 2019; Ross, 2019). These processes intensify the risks associated with job losses, career prospects, and maintenance of living standards (Kalenda & Kočvarová, 2020), having a substantial impact on the groups that are most at risk (International Labour Office, 2019). In addition, effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic are likely to exacerbate these negative effects rather than mitigate them (Boeren et al., 2020; Waller et al., 2020).

Despite the increase in new social risks and increasing political pressure on lifelong learning, we can see that many people do not participate in AET. According to the 2016 International Adult Education Survey, half to three-quarters of adults (age 25 to 64) did not participate in AET 12 months prior to the survey. Non-participation reached up to 90% in the 60+ age cohorts (AES, 2016).

Non-participation in AET

Historically, many authors formulated models attempting to resolve what causes non-participation in AET. Earlier conceptions focus mainly on socio-psychological factors related to involvement in AET, such as motivation (Boshier, 1971; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Rubenson, 1977), deterrents (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985) or barriers to organised learning opportunities (Cross, 1981), while later models turn their attention from the individual to structural determinants which lower chances of different social groups to participate in AET. Some authors from this theoretical camp have focused on the welfare state system or skill-formation regime (Dämmrich et al., 2015; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). In contrast, others prefer more meso-social determinants connected with characteristics of education providers or differences according to economic sectors and size of firms (Brunello et al., 2007). Most contemporary attempts (Boeren, 2016, 2017; Boeren et al., 2010; Cabus et al., 2020) represent complex models that pay equal attention to individual characteristics and structural aspects.

Notwithstanding their explanatory strength and usefulness for large-scale quantitative surveys, these conceptions are not the best guide for understanding culturally specific strategies of actors' decision making – various meanings that help adults make sense of lifelong learning and its usefulness or uselessness, benefits, threats and moral imperatives related to participation in AET. They predominantly work with reasons for participation as fixed, bounded entities internalised by adults or with a set of external factors that directly affect their behaviour. Moreover, according to Kjell Rubenson (2011) and Sissell Kondrup (2015) non-participation cannot be explained simply by postulating a lack of motivation or by pointing to the existence of barriers. The premise of lack of

motivation in some earlier studies (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965) is based on the assumption, that beyond motivation, there are no other objective reasons for individuals to not participate in AET. The premise emphasising barriers to education (Cross, 1981), on the other hand, is based on the erroneous assumption that adults do not participate in AET simply because they face external barriers that prevent them from doing so even though they want to.

According to many authors, the relationship between attitudes, motivation, the social world of the actors, learning opportunities and actual participation/non-participation in AET is highly complex, ‘multilevel’ (Boeren, 2016, 2017; Boeren et al., 2010; Kyndt et al., 2013a), and always situationally grounded (Paldanius, 2007; Rubenson, 2010; Rubenson & Salling Olesen, 2007).

One way to avoid the dilemma between barriers and motivations is to examine the situationally determined rationality of the actors’ decision-making from the culturalist perspective (Alexander, 2003; Lizardo, 2021). This approach emphasises that when adults make a decision, for example, about participation in AET, one must consider the value and meaning of lifelong learning or educational needs and opportunities within a particular social world of the actor. Our contention is that all social worlds involve a set of *cultural tools* (Swidler, 1986, 2001) used by actors to understand their situation, AET and *reasons* for their involvement or non-involvement in organised learning activities.

Cultural tools are symbols, narratives/stories and discourses endowed with meaning that serve actors as resources to construct their strategies of action. According to the author of this concept, Ann Swidler (1986), such cultural tools form a *broader cultural toolkit* of individuals and serve as the basis of their decision-making; the toolkit is not a unified and universal cultural system that can be found everywhere, across all social classes and groups. Instead, it is a set of complex and changing concepts – for instance, different symbols of AET (e.g. a symbol of success, moral obligation or threat for self-esteem) or narratives (e.g. participation as a second life-chance or wasting of one’s time and energy in unequal society) – that actors use selectively (Swidler, 1986). Cultural tools are used not only for navigation of decision-making and legitimising the action or its absence but also for maintaining a coherent picture of adults themselves and the world around them (Vaisey, 2009). Based on them, the reasons for (non-)participating in AET are formed.

Reasons for non-participation: state of the art

Reasons for participating in AET have been repeatedly examined since the 1960s (Boeren, 2016; Boeren et al., 2012; Boshier, 1971; Cross, 1981; Kyndt et al., 2013a). Research into the reasons for non-participation, on the other hand, has remained underdeveloped (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020, p. 96). As Table 2 illustrates, large-scale quantitative surveys have offered only basic taxonomy of reasons for non-participation based on the data from the Adult Education Survey.

Table 2. Population not wanting to participate in education and training by main reasons (source: Eurostat 2021a).

Reason for non-participation in AET	Population	2011	2016	Absolute change 2011 to 2016*	Relative change 2011 to 2016
„No need“ (mainly dispositional barriers)	ISCED 3–8	68.3	79.4	+ 11.1	+ 16
	ISCED 0–2	68.7	70.1	+ 1.4	+ 2
	Age 25–54 years	60.2	73.9	+ 13.7	+ 23
	Age 55–64 years	73.2	79.9	+ 6.7	+ 9
„Personal“ (mainly situational barriers)	ISCED 3–8	12.5	8.4	– 4.1	– 33
	ISCED 0–2	12.2	13.6	+ 1.4	+ 11
	Age 25–54 years	15.5	8.6	– 6.9	– 45
	Age 55–64 years	10.6	9.7	– 0.9	– 8
„Other“ (mainly institutional barriers)	ISCED 3–8	16.3	9.9	– 6.4	– 39
	ISCED 0–2	16.4	13.8	– 2.6	– 16
	Age 25–54 years	21.6	14.6	– 7.0	– 32
	Age 55–64 years	13.5	8.4	– 5.1	– 38

Note: Data in percents. *Difference in percent points. European Union Countries (27 states) average.

While empirical research in this area is scarce, a basic typology of reasons can be deduced from the current literature, especially with regard to low-educated workers.

The first reason for rejecting AET is the *overall negative attitudes towards education*. This attitude is formed in early socialisation, especially through a negative experience with schooling (Illeris, 2006; Kyndt et al., 2013b). As a result of this experience, as Rubenson and Salling Olesen (2007), Rubenson (2011), many individuals form so called dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981) at an early stage of their lives, and later show a lack of interest in education and a lack of belief in their abilities (Larson & Milana, 2006; Maurer et al., 2003; Patterson, 2018).

This experience is typical for low-educated adults (UNESCO, 2019; Vermeersch & Vandembrouck, 2010), who display lower educational aspirations and regard formal education as an activity that reduces their self-esteem, deprives them of the sense of control and is accompanied by negative emotions – anxieties and fears. As a result, education is perceived undesirable, especially in the face of informal learning, which is considered to be a much more effective tool for the formation and development of knowledge and skills useful for everyday life (Vermeersch & Vandembrouck, 2010).

The prevalence of this kind of barrier among non-participants is evident from Table 2. The table also shows that the strength of dispositional barriers has increased since 2011.

The second reason can be described as a *different understanding of the function of AET*. Education is not considered a value in itself, it is instead seen through the lens of instrumental rationality as it should primarily serve to gain employment (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965). For this reason, people with lower qualifications are only willing to participate in AET when they need to get a job, or their job is at risk (Hayes & Darkenwald, 1990). A similar understanding can also be found among older individuals, who connect the utility of education primarily with labour market and thus avoid AET as irrelevant at their age (Boeren, 2016; Brady & Fowler, 1988; Rubenson, 2018).

The third reason draws on *the mismatch between skill requirements and the existing skills of adults* (CEDEFOP, 2018). Paldanius (2007, see also, Kyndt et al., 2013b) shows that the non-participation of low-educated workers results from several interconnected factors. Individuals, whose job involves routine work, no opportunity for career progress and who are not directly threatened by unemployment have no reason to participate in AET. As Rubenson (2010, p. 218) states: ‘For this group, non-participation becomes a highly rational act.’

This reasoning is also supported by the results of the CEDEFOP survey (CEDEFOP, 2018) which demonstrates that in fact there are more adults with excess skills, than those who are lacking them. These findings have been confirmed by McGuinness et al. (2017), who provides evidence that the mismatch is more common among older workers, people in positions with low skill requirements and a lower rate of change in the work environment.

To further refine this type of reasoning, we draw on the results of qualitative research by Kyndt et al. (2013b). According to their findings, low-qualified workers are motivated to keep up with social and technological change. However, the change needs to manifest itself directly in their social world and have tangible consequences for the actors. In this regard, education is understood as part of a reactive strategy, not a proactive practice. Education, then, is rather seen as a burden, than an investment (Gorard & Selwyn, 2005).

We believe that the three reasons can complement and support each other in justifying non-participation. The negative experience gained in formal education leads to an instrumental understanding of further education as a tool for gaining employment. Individuals are then willing to participate in AET only if their position in the labour market is directly threatened.

Despite the existing knowledge, we do not know how non-participants legitimise non-participation in AET in their own account. It is unclear, whether they use a broader range of reasoning, or whether each of the three groups has a unique toolkit that helps them understand and legitimise their non-participation in organised learning. What is traditionally labelled as dispositional, situational and institutional barriers (Cross, 1981) and assumed to represent segments of reality unmediated by reflexivity and discourse, we understand as cultural tools in the form of

symbols, narratives and discourses actively used by actors. For instance, instead of anticipating that the meaning of lifelong education is deeply internalised in the adults, we argue, together with the culturalist approach (Alexander, 2003; Lizardo, 2021), that dispositional barriers such as self-worth, self-efficacy and the overall meaning of education and learning are part of the cultural toolkits of social worlds which the adults inhabit.

Moreover, most of the reasoning described so far is based on an investigation of the life-world of workers with lowest education levels. Relatively little is known about other groups of non-participants. These include older adults, or adults on parental leave. While the first group currently faces increased educational demands (Desjardins, 2020), the second experiences a significant drop in functional literacy, which complicates their reintegration into the labour market (Straková & Veselý, 2013). Additionally, adults on parental leave have very few opportunities for AET, which further complicates their position (Gatta, 2008; Gatta & Depez, 2008). These three groups of adults consistently exhibit low rates of participation in AET and we have little knowledge of the ways members of these groups account for and legitimise this status quo.

Research aim

Our research objective is to identify and describe cultural tools that are used to legitimise non-participation in AET by three groups of non-participants: low-educated workers, retired adults and persons on parental leave. A related aim is to account for their interrelatedness and strategic use among the examined groups. By accounting for the cultural tools, we will be able to better understand the ‘situational decision-making’ (Rubenson & Salling Olesen, 2007) of participation in AET.

Research methods

This study is part of a research project focusing on determinants of participation in non-formal education of adults in the Czech Republic. Given that participation in AET has been repeatedly shown to be a function of initial education (e.g. UNESCO, 2019), our first point of focus has been on adults with low levels of education. Since the effect of initial education is continuous across educational levels, we did not restrict our focus to the lowest educational level (ISCED 0–2). Instead, we aimed to cover a spectrum of lower educational levels (ISCED 2–3) that still exhibit low participation rates. Specifically, we focused on adults without secondary school-leaving exam (ISCED 3C) as this indicates, that after completing compulsory education, the individuals opted for a trajectory that makes higher education inaccessible. We also included adults with the secondary school-leaving exam (ISCED 3A), who did not utilise it in the labour market (i.e. worked at positions that according to the national catalogue of professions do not require it). To further broaden the perspective on non-participation, our second point of focus were adults on parental leave, taking care of children less than 3 years old. Third, we focused on retired persons older than 60.

Beyond this theory based sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we aimed for gender balance in the first group, while the prevalence of women in the second and third groups reflects the gender ratio of the overall population in those categories. Also, all interviewees from the first group were either employed, or self-employed. This criterion served to differentiate interviewees in the first group from similarly educated interviewees from the second and third groups, so that no interviewee could be included in two groups simultaneously. A final criterion common to all three groups was that the individuals did not participate in formal, or non-formal education in the past 12 months. However, this does not mean that the interviewees had no previous experience with non-formal education. As we learned during the interviews, older experiences with non-formal education were common, especially in the first and second groups. It is thus important to note that the sample does not consist of non-participants in the sense of not having an experience with non-

formal education at all. Also, in four cases, it became clear only during the interview that the individual took part in an educational activity in the past year. In three cases, this clearly represented a rare event in the biography of the interviewees, which were otherwise characterised by long-term non-participation. As many of the other interviewees also had previous experience with non-formal education, we decided to include these three interviews into the sample. The one remaining case showed consistent participation in educational activities and therefore we excluded the interview from our sample. In total, the sample consists of 53 interviews (see, [Tables 3 and 4](#) for details), amounting to 2 176 minutes of recorded material. The length of the interviews range from 18 to 111 minutes with the majority of the interviews (41) longer than 30 minutes. We use pseudonyms to refer to interviewees, while also indicating their gender, education, and the group, to which they belong: e.g. Monika (F 3C 1).

The interviews were carried out from April 2019 to October 2020 by three authors of this study. First, an original version of the conversational guide (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) was developed after consulting available research on determinants of participation and on the three groups of adults. The initial literature review yielded topics such as educational aspirations, experience with schooling, job security, stability of life trajectory, or self-classification with regard to educational criteria. The initial guide was tested with interview partners and revised. Interviews from this stage were not included in the sample. Revisions included changing the succession of questions and extending the guide to cover free time and a broader biography of the interviewees. Second, a pilot phase consisted in gathering 5 interviews in each group, analysing them and re-evaluating the conversational guide. At this stage, no new major topic was added to the guide and the interviews were included in the sample. The resulting interview guide was designed to cover free time, work experience, memories of initial education, experience with non-formal education, a sense of job security, aspirations, barriers, life transitions and questions regarding education and learning in general. Third, the remaining interviews were carried out and analysed. This stage was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and as a result, data gathering took longer than initially planned. Interviewees were first reached through snowball sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994), starting from personal contacts the authors had in the three groups. After depleting our contacts, we reached out to a private research agency (member of ESOMAR). The agency recruited interviewees according to our sampling criteria through its established network of interviewers. The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed using ATLAS.ti. Each author analysed the data from a group, in which they gathered interviews. The analysis consisted of ‘generic’ coding and memo writing in cycles (Saldaña, 2009). The analysis progressed in stages corresponding to those of data gathering, with each new stage revising the codes of the previous one. At each stage, we also sorted and compared the results across the three groups (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In the final stage, codes were generalised and assigned to an emerging typology of legitimation strategies.

Table 3. Gender structure of the interview sample.

Gender	Low-educated	Parental leave	Retired
Males	11	1	6
Females	9	16	10
Total	20	17	16

Table 4. Educational structure of the interview sample.

Education	Low-educated	Parental leave	Retired
Primary (ISCED 2B)	2	0	2
Secondary (ISCED 3C)	12	1	5
Secondary (ISCED 3A)	6	5	3
Tertiary (ISCED 5B-A)	0	11	6
Total	20	17	16

The four strategies of legitimation

In the interview data, we identified four main strategies that effectively legitimise non-participation in AET. It is worth noting that the statements used for analysis were not necessarily used by the interviewees in direct reference to educational activities. Rather, we constructed the four types from statements that we believe form coherent and compelling ways to support non-participation. Their interplay accounts for a worldview, in which AET declaratively does not represent a meaningful way of personal or professional growth. In the analysis, we position the low-educated adults as the primary reference. Focus on this group overlaps with previous qualitative research on non-participation (e.g. Kyndt et al., 2013b), facilitating comparison of our results in discussion. We also found that the legitimation strategies are typically most pronounced in this group. As a result, we decided to elaborate each strategy first with regard to this group and then to systematically broaden our focus in order to account for the variability of legitimation strategies in the remaining two groups.

Commitment to lifelong learning

While communicating the topic to our interviewees, we framed the interview as focusing on the variety of ways in which people learn in different situations. We opted for this framing as it was consistent with our research interest and at the same time, it opened up space to delve into the broader life context of the interviewees. With such framing, we intended to avoid explicitly confronting the interviewees with the impression that they are lacking in education. In our interview script, we instead covered education as simply one of the options that individuals have.

Given the interview framing, we anticipated that the interviewees will be primed to focus on the learning aspects of their activities. However, it still came as a surprise that individuals, who meet the conditions to be labelled as non-participants in AET by standard measures, identify very strongly with the notion of lifelong learning. And even though this identification may to some degree be elicited by the interview framing, it still needs to be acknowledged that it is, nonetheless, effective in legitimising non-participation.

In their own account, the interviewees aspire to the ideal of lifelong learning and demonstrate their commitment to it through emphasising the learning involved mainly in their work and hobbies, but also in personal relationships and general life experience. It is important to note that the instances of learning that interviewees list are largely not proactive, instead they often involve reactions to common problems manifesting in different varieties. But even more serious challenges are framed in such a way that proactive learning is not seen as a remedy. Low-educated adults, in particular, omit unpreparedness in their statements and emphasise their ability to learn and adapt instead. Lukáš (M 3A 1), a factory worker, describes his learning on a part-time job in the following way:

Well, no studying or preparation at home or anything. You just jump right into it . . . as it always is . . . dive into the water and swim. And this is probably the best school. Not some preparation at home, or looking at some video and then trying to remember what was there. You just pick it up and start. And you just do it. (Lukáš)

The interviewees draw a sense of self-respect by claiming that they were able to deal with all problems they encountered so far, even though no one prepared them for it. The point of emphasis seems to be a strategic choice. Should the interviewees dwell on unpreparedness, the logical conclusion would lead them to acknowledge the desirability of preparing (perhaps through an educational activity) next time. Instead, the emphasis placed on adaptability makes education redundant, while showcasing the interviewees' inherent qualities.

When proactive learning is practiced, it is usually found among persons on parental leave. Sensing a withdrawal of their competence during the time they are off the labour market, these individuals stress the need to learn proactively. However, due to time constraints and other

obstacles, they opt for attempts at self-education. Another form of intentional learning is found among retired persons and their hobbies. This learning also draws heavily on direct experience, but the activity is maintained as a source of intellectual input rather than for its practical benefit. The hobbies are also self-driven. Organised courses (such as the University of the Third Age) are seen as beneficial mainly for providing an opportunity to socialise. As a result, retired persons declare that they would consider participating when they would ‘end up alone’. Otherwise, they see themselves as capable of learning on their own.

The interviewees also described situations, in which they serve as a source of learning for others. Parents and grandparents are naturally well positioned for being a source of intergenerational learning, but we found instances of advice giving, or even providing training across all three groups. Vlastimil (M 3C 1), a trained electrician, elaborates on how long the learning period in his current job was:

Vlastimil: They already come to me and ask, how should they arrange it. They send me on contracts that are difficult to do and all that.

Interviewer: So those three or four months are for being able to work normally and after two years, you can deal with anything?

Vlastimil: Yes. I even give advice over the phone, what they should do.

Even though interviewees did not relate this directly to education, elaborating on such situations puts them in a position, where they can demonstrate their proficiency and the knowledge they accumulated. As a result, interviewees present themselves as not the ones lacking in knowledge or skills. On the contrary, they help others to fill gaps in their competence.

Preference of experience over theoretical knowledge

In the interviews, participants have drawn on the positive connotations of experience as compared to theory. While theory is downplayed as being impractical, unnecessarily complicated and out of touch with the real world, experience is valued as a source of knowledge that directly translates into practical benefits. As organised forms of education are associated by the interviewees mainly with theory transmission, the preference of experience provides a reason to avoid both formal and non-formal education.

For low-educated adults, the preferred way to learn is through doing or exercising. According to them, such way of learning is more demanding than participating in an educational activity. Individuals learn through trial and error, not through instruction. Marek (M 3A 1), a trained stonemason, describes his transition to being a metal machining operator:

Marek: Well I did receive [some training]. But it was like . . . He showed me once or twice and then you try. So you try, two hours, three hours you struggle and still can't. Then he comes again and shows it again. But through those attempts you still remember it best I think.

Interviewer: So it's like, if someone was there all the time and was telling you . . .

Marek: Then you wouldn't learn anything, you would just look. You would wait for him to tell you what to do all the time. And this is worth nothing.

. . .

You must prove that you have an attitude to work. When it's clear that you make an effort and you're not elsewhere smoking all the time, then others approach you differently. It's like . . . when someone new comes and you can tell since the first day that they don't want to work, then the others will not support them. They just need to prove that they are worth it. Otherwise, it leads nowhere. (Marek)

According to the interviewees, the increased difficulty has two positive effects: first, more is remembered if individuals are forced to deal with mistakes and arrive at conclusions themselves; second, the difficulties associated with this way of learning create a selection mechanism

for newcomers. Those who succeed in learning in this manner not only gain knowledge and skills, they also prove themselves worthy. This again allows our interviewees to enhance their sense of self-respect by positioning themselves as those resilient enough to prevail in such a process.

Another way to downplay education – this time common to all three groups – is related to its expected effects. Throughout the interviews, we found that there are very high expectations regarding competences, personal traits, or even moral integrity associated with high education. This could be seen as a stereotype on the part of those with low education, but in fact, the expectations are found also on the part of interviewees with higher education attainment:

Such person is resolute. They never lie. They know exactly what they want. They are rigorous. They are able to lead people . . . They are not abusive toward employees, not even verbally. They are able to lead calmly, and even then, the others appreciate and respect them. (Romana F 3A 2)

From my experience, there is a difference between being educated and being wise. I found that anyone can get education, but that doesn't mean they are wise. They don't even need to be smart, it can be a total simpleton, who just had a lot of motivation to finish the school. (Vendula F 5A 2)

These expectations are associated with 'real' education, as opposed to common education that currently takes place at schools and other institutions. The interviewees often point out, that according to their experience, individuals with university diplomas and other credentials do not meet these expectations. At times, education can also be seen as counterproductive. Education is associated with excessive specialisation, which translates to an image of an individual immersed in a field of expertise, while being unfit for other areas of life. Interviewees claimed that it is better to have a well-developed common sense and to have broad knowledge from many walks of life than to specialise through an educational path. In these statements, common sense and education are assumed to be mutually exclusive. At best, the interviewees claimed that in everyday life, they are not aware of any major differences between themselves and individuals with higher attained education that they personally know:

It's like, my daughter, she is well educated. But I don't see a difference between me and her. When I consider it, she has university education, but when it comes down to it, we are alike, me and her. I don't see any difference in that she is educated and I'm not. (Radmila F 3C 3)

These remarks build upon an implicit assumption that high-educated individuals should meet the highest requirements not only in their competence, but also in value internalisation, life experience, or personality traits. Setting the requirements so high allows the interviewees to render education as ineffective intellectual exercise. Such an image of education does not compel participation.

Preference of full dedication

When adults opt for further education, they typically do so at a point in life when they have other significant commitments in work and personal life. Further education is thus competing for time and other resources much more, than initial education. Given the commitments adults already have, it can be claimed that full dedication to educational activities cannot be achieved. Either they would not be able to take full advantage of the opportunity to learn, or they would have to cut back on other commitments. Faced with such a dilemma, the interviewees declare they will rather not engage in education, than to deal with the necessity to compromise on their commitments.

For low-educated adults, however, dedication is not related as much to time constraints, as it rather represents an alternative strategy to gain competence. We found a strong emphasis placed on 'attitude' towards work. It is seen as the main differentiating factor between those who are competent and those who are not. If individuals enjoy work and do it honestly, then they perform

better and are able to learn on the fly. While low-educated individuals with a positive attitude towards work will (eventually) do well, highly educated individuals without such attitude never will. Ema (F 3C 1), a trained shop assistant, reflects on the attitude of others in her profession:

I think that it's not in gaining a certificate, or graduating from school. You must be willing and must have a relationship to it. If you have a relationship . . . I like fashion and I go shopping a lot and the shop assistants, they don't care at all. They won't fold the clothes; they just stick the price tags. You ask her and she doesn't know anything. It's just not about having a school or not, it's about having a relationship to the job. When there is no relationship, you can have ten certificates, or ten schools, and it doesn't matter. When you are not enjoying the work, then it's futile, it's vain. And we always said, why is she doing it, when she's not enjoying it (laughing). (Ema)

The primary commitments in the other groups are not work related and they result in time constraints that, in the eyes of interviewees, make educational activities inaccessible, or redundant. Persons on parental leave are fully engaged in care giving, spending available time and other resources to facilitate development of their children. In such setting, allocating time to educational activities would be seen as sacrificing the wellbeing of children for the benefit of the parent's self-interest, or for the benefit of work commitments. Parental leave is seen as a period of full dedication to the child's needs. However, the dedication issue does not go away with the end of this period. In fact, we found that the tensions associated with full dedication are very pronounced in interviews with persons who have both family and work commitments. Andrea (F 3C 1), a working parent reflects on her commitments:

Yes, but also the time. I'm like that, when I know, that I cannot do it fully, I rather won't do it at all. I just don't like to compromise on things. I would be in stress that I need to dedicate time to it and I have an exam coming and I would be neglecting the housekeeping. I would be nervous that I can't manage the housekeeping, I have to study, I have to do other stuff, and this is just not for me. (Andrea)

Given that retired persons are free from work obligations and the main responsibilities of child rearing, it came as a surprise how much some of them emphasised lack of free time. This was a result of commitments that included babysitting their grandchildren, work on garden or house, cooking, and for some also intensive hobbies. Most of these activities are seen as given, they are not considered options to be voluntarily chosen. In this sense, retired persons see themselves as attached to their commitments with similar intensity to the other groups. While hobbies are the obvious exception, our interviewees preferred learning in the areas of interest by engaging with them in a direct and unstructured manner rather than through organised learning (if available at all). This tendency largely stems from the preference of experience and the commitment to lifelong learning as elaborated above.

Mobilisation of past educational experience

On various occasions our interviewees referred to the past – to their own biography or to the past of the society at large. These references are usually evaluative. Past is remembered in comparison to present and is framed as being better or worse. It is especially references that relate to education in the past that have an effect towards legitimising non-participation in the present. Among all three groups we find claims that formal education had higher quality in the past. Education was less specialised, it involved more of vocational training, it was more demanding and the rules were stricter. As a result, interviewees old enough to make such comparisons feel that school prepared them better for life, than is the case today:

Yes, yes. They taught us everything. They said that a good mechanic can machine the components needed for repair himself. And there is some truth to it. Today, the profession is only lathe, or something else, but we were taught everything. I think it was good like that. (Vlastimil M 3C 1)

I had a week of practical training followed by a week of school. Today, it's two weeks of school and a day of training. I think that this is a little . . . Then you throw the person into real work and you can't even give them the most basic tasks to do. (Martin M 3C 1)

And it is true that for us it was a bit different. When we got C from the teacher, we were ashamed. We hid under the desk and we knew we did bad. Today, it's different. Today, a kid gets an F and parents run to school, how dare the teacher, that he can't teach properly, that it's his fault. So today it's really different. (Bohdana F 3A 1)

The past is considered worse mainly when the scope of opportunities is compared. In the past, choice of field of study was often severely limited. However, this only serves to reinforce the value of education in the past. Individuals had no other choice but to cope with education that was more difficult, and that often made the desired fields of study inaccessible. Interviewees draw upon these experiences to further connect their self-image with resilience. Schools provided them with solid basis and they managed to cope even in harder conditions. In their eyes, today's youth has a wealth of options that can be used not only for self-fulfilment, but also as venues to avoid difficult points in the educational trajectory. And so, even though curricula were innovated numerous times, schools are considered to perform poorly in equipping their graduates for real life. It is then perhaps the graduates, who are in need of further education.

Discussion

The four strategies elaborated above can be related to barriers to participation in AET. [Table 5](#) provides a structured overview. The table can be read as indicating how barriers are discursively framed by the interviewees. The following paragraphs elaborate on the ways such framing results in shifts of meaning unanticipated in the literature on (non-)participation in AET. It is important to note, that by seeking deliberations on the matter of participation, more agency is afforded to individuals. Our data show how barriers are treated when interviewees are provided with enough space to elaborate.

Beyond the unanticipated meanings we point out below, our results also question two broadly accepted assumptions. First, given the fact that barriers are usually measured through verbal declarations recorded by surveys, it is conceivable that they reflect what respondents deem as legitimate reasons for non-participation instead of simply recording the underlying causes. In this regard, our findings indicate a possible reinterpretation of surveys measuring declarative barriers to participation in AET. For instance, the shift to dispositional barriers indicated in [Table 2](#) could be interpreted as a result of increased confidence of non-participants. The shift may mean that instead of relying on external factors (situational and institutional barriers) for explaining their non-involvement, they feel that they can legitimately turn down educational activities just by expressing their attitude. Although a speculation at this point, the increased confidence would seem to correspond to the state of EU labour market in 2016 (Eurostat, [2021b](#)) that indicated a recovery from the recession of 2009 and its aftermath in the following years.

Second, the interviews presented here bring forth the question, whether non-participation is a choice, or a function of structural conditions in which adults find themselves. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a conclusive answer to this question. However, we believe that our research has shown that at least for some segments of adults, non-participation can represent an intentional choice. We acknowledge that this result might be affected by the selection of interviewees. It is reasonable to expect that structural inequalities would be more manifest in groups with lower education and socio-economic status. The point to be made here is that non-participation can involve choice as well as structural inequality and that by placing emphasis on structural conditions, the agency of non-participants is neglected.

Consistent with the findings of Kyndt et al. ([2013b](#)) and Vermeersch and Vandembrouck ([2010](#)), our interviewees declare development of their abilities through informal learning. We were able to examine this tendency as work-related, but also as related to family life or hobbies. Within

Table 5. Overview of legitimization strategies.

	Commitment to lifelong learning	Preference of experience	Preference of full dedication	Mobilisation of past experience
Low-educated	Reactive learning	Learning by doing	Expectations education cannot satisfy	Relationship to work is more important than education
Parental leave	Proactive learning	Interviewees as source of knowledge for others	Education is incompatible with common sense	Strong commitments outside of work and education
Retired		Unspecified way of preferred learning		Education was of higher quality in the past
Type of barriers		Dispositional barriers (specific attitudes towards education and learning)	Situational barriers (work and family responsibilities)	Institutional barriers (quality of education)

employment, we further examined the emphasis placed on attitude towards work, which is seen as both a substitute to formal qualification and a facilitator of informal learning. However, such a bond to work does not imply specialisation and it does not preclude any options of alternative employment, which represents an exit strategy that has been shown to support non-participation in AET (Kyndt et al., 2013b, p. 190).

The effectiveness of education in producing the expected results is also problematised. In the eyes of our interviewees, competence can be more effectively gained through informal learning instead of education. Education also fails to deliver other benefits (e.g. form desirable values). On the contrary, high education is associated with negative traits such as excessive specialisation, lack of common sense, or even arrogance. When the primary functions of education regarding competence and socialisation are removed, the main utility that remains is the advantage a certificate gives on the labour market. In this regard, our findings also shed some light on why AET is understood through instrumental rationality by non-participants (Hayes & Darkenwald, 1990; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965).

A leitmotif recurring across the identified strategies can be found in building up the image of self-respect. Contributing to this image is the emphasis placed by the interviewees on their adaptability, resilience, accumulated knowledge, broad outlook, dedication, or the quality of initial education. As Illeris (2006) suggests, the feelings associated with self-respect can represent an obstacle to participation in AET. However, we were able to show, that self-respect need not draw on failed, or structurally inaccessible identities, but also on identities that are validated in everyday experience.

We did find some support for the effect of previous negative experiences with education (Boeren, 2016; Illeris, 2006; Kyndt et al., 2013b; Rubenson, 2010, 2018). However, our data did not indicate a straightforward effect of such experiences on participation in AET. Some of our interviewees had negative experiences, while others spoke of past education fondly. Moreover, negative experiences may not imply, that the individual will not intend to repeat them through further engaging in educational activities. They may contribute to a sense of self-respect instead, which in turn renders education redundant. Our findings showed that even positive past experience with education can be used to legitimise non-participation. The belief in quality of one's own initial education may lead to the feeling of over-qualification.

Limits and conclusion

One possible limitation of our study is that all studied social worlds of non-participants are interconnected through specific skill-formation regime (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012) that is typical for the Czech Republic. Its institutional system is characterised by strong initial education (Saar et al., 2013) and a closed labour market with a low level of unemployment and high demand for employees of all qualifications (Kalenda et al., 2020). As a result, these structural conditions form a higher level of basic skills among adults and less external pressure for involvement in education and training compared to other countries. Because of that, our informants see themselves as educated and skilled enough for their professional, or personal life and emphasise their previous education as the key foundation of their non-participation.

Furthermore, our results must be read as related to the particular groups of non-participants included in the research. The legitimisation strategies are part of their social worlds and cannot be easily extrapolated to other groups of non-participants, such as migrants, youth workers, or women employed in low-skill service and industry jobs (Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2020).

By examining adults with varying educational levels, adults that are off the labour market just as well as those that are employed (or self-employed), we were able to draw a broader picture of the reasoning behind non-participation in AET, than previous qualitative research. We believe that studying adults in very different life situations highlights the inherent situatedness of decision making (Kondrup, 2015; Paldanius, 2007; Rubenson & Salling Olesen, 2007). At the same time, our results show that the situational rationality involves what seems to be a strategic use of cultural tools (Swidler, 1986, 2001). Interviewees identified with what they feel is considered as desirable – lifelong learning, dedication,

hands-on experience, even formal education – and constructed narratives to legitimise non-participation in AET. In one move, they were able to make sense out of their non-participation, while also building a positive self-image of competent individuals. Education and lifelong learning are not rejected by non-participants, as one would expect, but reinvented to suit their needs and worldviews.

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