Improving career prospects for the low-educated

The role of guidance and lifelong learning

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Foreword

Europe needs a well-educated and qualified workforce to face the economic and competitive challenges of the coming years. Low-educated and low-skilled adults are a resource that can be empowered to enter jobs with higher demands. This group, however, faces not only a higher risk of unemployment but also of social marginalisation or exclusion due to deteriorating work and life conditions, including much lower participation in lifelong learning.

Social inclusion is an urgent challenge which has become even more pressing following the recent economic crisis. This challenge has been further highlighted by the recent mass influx of refugees who, in many cases, might not be sufficiently prepared for working in the European labour market and will require upskilling.

As with career guidance and counselling, vocational education and training are valuable resources which can promote labour market integration and social inclusion, while decreasing the risk of unemployment or underemployment. Targeted support increases the likelihood for active career management and re-engagement in learning by the low-skilled. However, often the first step to successfully integrating this group into the labour market and society is to rebuild their identities as workers and learners. Continuing education and retraining must, therefore, take into account individuals' needs as well as their prior, often experienced-based, knowledge from learning environments that emphasise the link with work practice.

This study contributes to finding efficient means of addressing the needs of the low-skilled. It gives voice to this group and shows the variety of life circumstances and experiences that prevent individuals from engaging in further learning. The study also offers insights into experiences, expectations and learning needs, using a sample of individuals from seven countries. Analysis of their biographies shows how diverse the group of low-educated and low-skilled adults is, how different their work and life conditions are, and how much the support they receive may differ across EU countries. Further, it shows how strong peer and community support can be for people with limited social and cultural capital.

Social inclusion and labour market integration of low-educated and low-skilled adults is a very important policy matter. I hope that this publication contributes to better understanding of the challenges ahead and how policy measures can help improve people's lives.

Joachim James Calleja
Director

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Executive summary

This study investigates how low-educated adults regard education and continuous learning, complementing an earlier Cedefop study focused on the role of learning in career transitions (Cedefop, 2014a; 2014b). It seeks to generate deeper understanding of multiple individual approaches to learning by:

(a) identifying common themes, approaches, ways and/or trajectories indicating how workers with few initial qualifications could be supported in their learning activities, career development, employability and career transitions;
(b) providing in-depth understanding of the variety of reasons explaining low-educated workers' disengagement with education, continuous learning and their often limited or non-participation in a range of continuing learning activities;
(c) investigating how some workers with few initial qualifications were able to develop their skills and build successful careers.

The report draws both on a literature review and an original collection of narratives from biographical interviews of individuals selected in seven EU Member States. The narratives describe the wide variety of reasons for engagement or non-engagement in learning, perceptions about and experiences of life/career transitions. The analysis focuses on motivations for learning (or not) and the conditions that shape individuals' behaviour. The findings of the survey confirm that early negative experiences with schooling are a major factor for a disengagement from education later in life. This, combined with individual issues (such as health problems) and structural constraints, tends to prevent individuals from participating in further education. Nevertheless, many examples show that adults labelled as low-educated possess in fact a variety of skills, which can be further developed if their interest in education is resparked.

The findings of the study are structured and presented according to five themes: (a) barriers to learning; (b) drivers for learning; (c) the relationship between initial education and training and career development; (d) approaches taken towards engaging in continuing education, training and career development; (e) the role of learning for life and career progress.

Methodology

In this study, desk research reviewing literature on the learning pathways and experience of the low qualified was combined with qualitative empirical research

to analyse career and learning biographies. Career and learning biographies of 105 low-educated individuals, aged between 25 and 40, were collected in seven countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy Poland and the UK) using semi-structured narrative interviews. Initial interviews (15) were complemented by follow-up interviews (8) up to 12 months later in each country. Thus, a total of 161 interviews form the basis for the analysis carried out in this study.

The first interviews aimed at understanding individual career and learning experiences. They were guided in such a way that individuals could link past, present and possible future career transitions and labour market experiences. The second interviews were shorter and focused on a progress report, especially where there has been significant change since the first interview. The major themes covered in the interviews using a semistructured interview guideline were:

(a) engagement with learning;
(b) drivers for learning;
(c) perceptions of outcomes of learning;
(d) attitudes to adult learning;
(e) role of learning in future navigation;
(f) intrapersonal influences;
(g) employment opportunities;
(h) work activity and career progression;
(i) career decision-making;
(j) entrepreneurship;
(k) accreditation of prior learning.

The sample of individuals who took part in the study was drawn up to represent as many different possible approaches to learning pathways as possible. It comprises men and women, individuals working in companies or self-employed. Most individuals came from low-income households with below-average cultural capital, worked in fields where their current income was below average, or in low-wage occupations. Their educational level included compulsory education or lower, or no qualifications with a real labour market value above EQF level 3. Although individuals below EQF level 3 are considered to be low-skilled, the study shows that this assumption is not warranted and that many of the interviewed individuals could actually draw on a wide array of skills.

Social background

The attainment of a given educational qualification is the result of the individuals' effort and of the support they receive, which is influenced by their social background. Individuals of disadvantaged social origins typically tend not to realise their potential within the schooling system. In addition, social background has a strong impact on literacy skills. Scrutiny of lifetime learning trajectories highlights the importance of five broad factors: time, place, gender, family, and initial schooling

How socioeconomic backgrounds impact on low qualified workers' aspirations and expectations have emerged as significant in the literature review. For some people low-skilled work is not something they see as a transitory state but as rather reflecting their 'natural place' and identity. The relative lack of inter-generational mobility in some societies means that the low-skilled also tend to have other family members in low-skilled employment and/or who experience significant spells of unemployment. As a consequence, young people from lower-class backgrounds are much more likely to settle for low-skilled work over a long period of time.

Barriers to learning

The individual narratives particularly highlight the distinction that needs to be made between barriers caused by the effect of low achievement and poor learning outcomes at school on future education, training and employment opportunities and those problems caused by poor motivation, lack of interest or poor attendance, which do not necessarily reflect the underlying ability of the individual.

The study finds that family obligations may be more an attitudinal obstacle (motherhood seen as a priority rather than personal development through learning) than a situational one (as usually interpreted in qualitative research). This suggests that situational barriers are sometimes a secondary problem and the real obstacle that prevents a person from participating in education is connected to identity issues and self-image.

Experiences in initial education can lead in different directions later in life. Some individuals carry a 'learning scar', others perceive learning as a means to achieve something else, while others again perceive adult learning in a different way to learning at school. Sometimes poor experiences in initial education become part of one's identity, although participants very rarely express it in direct or explicit ways. Hints of such 'low-educated identity' can be seen in statements

like ‘I am a practical person, theory is not for me’ or even ‘education is not for people like me’.

School performance can have significant effects on subsequent attitudes towards learning but it can have a much more direct effect in countries where it constrains educational and occupational choices, and thus transition pathways to employment, with those performing well at school generally having a much wider selection of opportunities from which to choose. Those who have fewer formal qualifications from initial education and training may therefore need to fashion their vocational identities in other ways and work-related socialisation often plays a key role in that process, helping individuals develop an occupational orientation, work attachment and commitment.

School experience can lead to positive or negative cycles and in the latter case the challenge is to break the negative cycle. There were two distinct groups: those for whom their lack of engagement with schooling was generalised to a suspicion about or active dislike of other forms of formal education and training and those who disliked school in particular but were willing to engage in other (often more practical) types of formal education and training later in life. The dynamic interaction evident between structure and agency during compulsory schooling is also apparent in post-school careers, whereby the particular set of opportunities with which they engaged could be very influential. Further barriers to learning can be perceived as lack of opportunity to learn, which may be the result of a limited number of courses at college, funding issues, access to transport or the location of a particular educational institution. For some, rural locations offered limited options in terms of learning and employment opportunities. Small communities meant that young people left school and went to work in family businesses where learning was often on-the-job.

Drivers for learning

Learning-rich and challenging work is exceptionally powerful as a vehicle for individual development, but access to such work is often limited to those who are already relatively highly qualified. It is, however, still possible for individuals to develop their skills particularly if they are willing to tackle a range of low-skilled work. However, they need to recognise that learning activities and related social practices can extend across a range of education, training and employment contexts, so learning needs to be seen as an activity which dynamically crosses boundaries.

Institutional support, such as public employment services, career guidance agencies, adult learning institutions and similar organisations, needs to use

frameworks which actively encourage awareness of the value of career adaptive behaviour. Career guidance was generally unfamiliar to many participants, particularly in the Czech Republic and Poland. In other country contexts where guidance is known there were mixed feelings regarding the usefulness of career guidance processes. When specifically asked whether they would appreciate any assistance or counselling about their future professional orientation, some replied in the affirmative, but without knowing exactly what this help comprised (content) and where such help could be found (context). Formal career guidance was more likely to be offered to those who became unemployed in countries with extensive public employment services provision, such as Denmark, Germany and the UK. Yet relatively little was said by participants about the provision of formal guidance when initial career choices were made.

A further driver for learning was to improve employment prospects, stabilise and/or maintain their position in the labour market or progress in their career. Particularly for the low-skilled, the process of occupational choice has become more extended and complex with people often having to deal with major discontinuities both in their education and work transitions, within their working lives and in their use of learning to cope with adult transitions. It was evident that the interviewees adopted very different approaches to making career decisions and transitions within the labour market, which ultimately impacted on their decision to engage in further learning as part of their career development. Considering career decision-making styles provides insights into how interviewees approach learning and make the decisions about whether to participate or not in education and training opportunities. There were no distinctive patterns between decision-making style and learning experiences or outcomes. Generally, strategic careerists were found to be more positive about their post-compulsory learning and its impact on their career development. Evaluative and aspirational careerists reflected on the barriers to learning and their implications. Learning for these careerists was about fulfilling a particular need. Opportunistic careerists were more likely to engage in learning linked to their current occupation.

Future career development and progression for some interviewees was focused on consolidating skills and experience to improve their current employment position. For others, career development was simply a part of their learning narrative and an activity they engaged in on a regular basis as part of performing their job well. A minority were unable to think about the future or lacked confidence and so were unable to consider career development and what it would mean for their work pathway. These narratives demonstrate how lack of concern about future orientation and career planning can demotivate learning

despite openness to willingness to learn in the future. Even those with high career aspirations can fail to consider learning in the future.

Several interviewees expressed positive attitudes to participation in adult education. Adult education is seen as a way to improve their situation, their status or their business prospects. The value of education in today's society seems engraved in their understanding of how to better their position socially and economically. However, to some of the interviewees, adult education, however desirable, does not seem an option because, for example, of age and health issues. In Denmark, adult vocational training (AMU) and basic vocational education (GVU) is the sector with the highest level of recognition of prior learning activity. However, there is lack of public awareness of the possibility of recognition of prior learning, with adult career guidance playing a surprisingly minor role.

An important correlation was found to exist between motivation for self-improvement and participation in adult learning, with people interested in developing their skills usually participating in some kind of training or learning activities. People with a higher initial level of education are more likely to be motivated by the desire to improve their knowledge and skills, while the low-skilled significantly more often participate out of obligation. The motivation to learn and the characteristics of the learners could be influential in attitudes towards participation in education and training, but the nature of the provision could also be important: depending on, for example, the possible benefits (increased job satisfaction, better job prospects, personal satisfaction); who pays and financial benefits; form of learning (work-based; self-directed; e-learning, etc.); access issues (cost, timing, location, etc.); whether the learning led to qualifications.

Tangible and immediate outcomes of education and learning emerged as a major motivation for learning for the low qualified interviewed in this research. Interviewees with low educational aspirations seem to attribute more importance to this external factor, while people with higher educational aspirations seem to be motivated internally (feeling good, satisfaction). For the majority, learning was goal orientated, whether undertaken as a necessity in the current labour market or undertaken for personal reasons to increase self-efficacy. Only a few interviewees engaged in learning out of interest, while others had no plans to engage in any education or learning programmes in the future. Across the seven countries common drivers for learning were identified, including a range of personality traits, individual motivations, goal-orientated learning and/or others supporting and encouraging learning.

The final driver for learning is identified as work-related and practical learning. The theme of practical and applicable learning outcomes of learning is

recurrent. A substantial number of interviewees reflected on the need for learning to be relevant to what they were doing at work. Learning on the job was found to motivate interviewees. Learning on the job, getting an immediate positive feed-back is a source of great personal satisfaction and can motivate some workers to invest in their career.

Relationship between initial education and training and career development

This chapter focuses on how individuals view their subsequent career development in the light of their relatively weak formal qualifications arising from their initial education and training and whether other aspects of their initial education were helpful for their career development. Lack of focus on practical skills was often connected to a negative perception of the formal education (too theoretical and/or disconnected from the needs of the labour market). The reality of the higher level of qualification being often a prerequisite for career progression in the labour market was perceived as a paradox by participants, because they often saw it as disconnected from the real level of skills. This can lead to different negative attitudes towards formal education: bitterness, fatalism, regret, or categorical refusal to participate. It seems also that participants with higher educational aspirations perceived a link between qualification and career development more than participants with lower educational aspirations.

Continuing education, training and career development

For some interviewees, continuing education is perceived as retraining for unemployed people. Nevertheless, the low-skilled see continuing education and training as potentially playing a role in their career development in a number of ways. First, it could act as a recognised pathway for continuing vocational development, including retraining if unemployed, leading to the prospect of more stable employment. Second, it could help with basic skill development of those who performed poorly in literacy and numeracy in initial education and training. Third, it could facilitate changes in career direction of those seeking to work in areas different from those in which they previously worked.

Engagement in continuing education sometimes played the role of a ‘corrective experience’ with a positive impact on the willingness to participate. However, the relationship between retraining courses and career navigation is far from causal in the perception of the low-skilled: many participants felt that such continuing education has very little value in the labour market and can hardly

have any positive impact on their career development. Also, the 'practical' self-image is sometimes connected to the preference of informal learning compared to other forms of learning. This only accentuates the need for broadening the access of the low-skilled to recognition of prior learning.

Aspirations and future orientation

The narratives highlight how local and national labour markets, and employment prospects, can negatively impact on an individual's motivation to learn. There is scepticism or even fatalism about the possibility of changing their situation because many participants struggled when confronted with workplace and labour market reality. Uncertainty about the skills needed in the labour market, an economic recession that reduces opportunities to find work, the need to possess degrees to access some occupations despite the declining value of some university degrees lead to confusion, sometimes resignation and tend to reduce willingness to participate in learning.

Conclusions

To improve effectiveness in reaching out to low-skilled adults and provide them with further development opportunities, one needs to pay particular attention to continuing education and training as well as career guidance and counselling. The narratives provided a large variety of ideas where both structures were either perceived as supportive to further development or seemed to provide barriers.

Our research suggests that effective continuing education and training needs to accomplish three tasks:

(a) it has to act as a entry point for continuing vocational development;
(b) it needs to support the skills development of those who performed less well in literacy and numeracy;
(c) it needs to facilitate changes in career direction for those seeking to work in areas different from those in which they previously worked.

To fulfil these three conditions the continuing vocational education and training (CVET) specifically targeted in this segment of the working population should recognise that:

(a) the incidence of people that are deviating from the norm of the good student is particularly high among low-skilled: difficult domestic conditions may have generated behaviour not consistent with good academic performance, illnesses and differential rate of maturation may have resulted in the same.

The educational system was not flexible enough to deal with the idiosyncrasies of the members of this group. Therefore, CVET programmes aimed at low-educated workers should be characterised by an extra layer of flexibility to accommodate individual situations;

(b) low-educated workers are often employed in low-wage jobs and have a precarious employment relationship. Often they have to work long hours to earn enough to support their families. Learning thus becomes a particularly taxing activity for the low-educated. Involvement of the employer in providing training would effectively ease time constraints;

(c) the narratives of the low-educated show that they do not reject learning entirely, as it is often thought, rather they associate learning with a purpose and prioritise practical forms of learning. Learning in this group is often associated with and driven by work. So, learning will have to be contextualised to happen in close proximity to work, possibly involving a period of internship;

(d) the sense of ownership and agency in the process of learning is of particular importance for the low-educated. They have often developed a sense of helplessness with respect to learning and career. Skills audits (similar to the *bilan de competences*) can be used to design long-term skills development programmes and to assess the progress achieved towards specific learning goals. Further, given the importance of on-the-job learning for the low-educated, skills audit should be complemented by validation procedures to make the skills, competences and knowledge accumulated through work an integral part of the learning trajectories delineated in the skills audit.

Career guidance is also particularly important for career development of low-skilled and low qualified. Career guidance can indeed play an important role in helping them articulate both the types of skills and knowledge which they may wish to develop and the education, training or employment contexts in which such skills and knowledge may be developed (Cedefop, 2008b; 2011a; 2011b). Career guidance may also help workers reflect upon the nature of their skill sets and whether changing job could help them develop their adaptability or employability. It can also assist employees in low-skilled work change their perspective towards aspects of learning, training and working. This may also help them become more reflexive in how they view opportunities, themselves and their support networks and develop a new sense of direction or become more proactive in their own career development. Overall, career guidance can help workers in low-skilled employment consider the most effective ways they can deploy and develop their skills, knowledge and understanding through a range of employment, education and training contexts. However, not all participants in this

research who had access to career guidance found it helpful. Additionally, for some participants, it had connotations of testing (and, therefore, personal failure) that resonated with negative experiences of education. Of course, the quality and nature of career guidance services needs consideration, and well-qualified professionals are needed to deliver services that are adequately resourced.

CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

Achieving social inclusion is one of the most urgent challenges facing the European Union today. With more than 80 million people at risk of poverty – including 20 million children and 8% of the working population – social exclusion related to a low socioeconomic background ([1]) and low education has been identified as one of three pressing priorities in the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2010). It is often connected to working in low-skilled jobs later in life, which puts individuals at a disadvantage in terms of the sociocultural achievements in life. Improving educational levels and promoting social inclusion through skills, especially aimed at improving workers' employability (COM, 2009) and at reducing poverty, are shared objectives which guide the action of the Member States and of the European Union.

Low-educated workers form a distinct group in every society. They are often perceived as a group with little interest in learning and few labour market opportunities, prone to unemployment and social marginalisation. Sometimes stereotypes depict members of this group as having social difficulties leading to non-desirable work-related behaviours. The low-skilled label as attached to school dropouts, labour market detachment, migration, possession of obsolete skills, as well as macro structural changes. Whether starting off as low-skilled in life or becoming low-skilled depends on many personal as well as structural factors, and this status can change over the life course (Maselli and Beblavý, 2014).

Not only has this group fewer resources, but individuals are also more prone to labour market risks. In fact, members of this group tend to be less sheltered from labour market fluctuations; for example the recent economic crisis has seen an increase in the incidence of unemployment among the low-skilled, fuelled by the swell in the flow of low-skilled workers from employment to unemployment. Low-skilled workers tend to be overrepresented in sectors and jobs in decline in the European economy, i.e. agriculture and manufacturing sectors and in routine jobs which can be offshored or replaced by technology or new forms of work organisation. They also tend to be working in sectors, such as construction,

([1]) To identify the target group to be studied the definer for low socioeconomic status is a net income of 20% above the national poverty line.

which are more exposed to business cycle fluctuations. In contrast, the proportion of higher educated in employment has steadily increased during the economic crisis, albeit at a slower pace than before (Cedefop, 2012a), and there are clear signs that low-educated workers have been exposed to displacement outside the labour market during the crisis. These trends are by no means limited to the present economic crisis but the recent recession has made them more acute.

Low-skilled workers often lack the cultural resources or capital to reflexively play with their identities and actively reconstruct them (Barone, 2006). So, the way in which education and training is delivered will play a significant role in the success of policies targeting this group. Policies in support of lifelong learning need to take into consideration that resistance to learning can occur when workers are directed (either by active labour market policies or by guidance services) towards learning environments in which they do not feel comfortable. A sense of not belonging is based on one's acculturation in a social environment with very limited financial and social resources (lack of role models, who are successful in the labour market) as well as a culture of resistance based on the belief that social upward mobility by means of education is impossible (Atherton, 1999).

Training is a valuable resource that can effectively decrease the risk of unemployment or underemployment as well as social exclusion. However, because low-educated/low-skilled adults have fewer training opportunities, fewer financial resources and a lack of social support for participation in learning activities, they need targeted forms of support to promote their participation in education and training. While financial mechanisms and opportunities and incentives aimed at the low-educated have been put in place, these might have a design that does not make them appealing to the group that would most need them. In addition, the extent to which one is able to support a family is an important part of role identity. Workers will not engage in full-time education (and rather look for any type of job) unless they are in a position to support themselves and their family financially during training. Research shows that besides the availability of financial resources and other incentives, workers' willingness to engage in training depends on prior educational/training experience and assessment of one's own capacities.

Learning and participating in education is strongly interlinked with identity building; this is why students often withdraw from their engagement in learning and, due to lack of family and peer support, seek alternative forms of self-affirmation (often reinforced by anticipation of troubled relations with employers in the workplace, anticipations which are not necessarily grounded in reality). Low-educated and low-skilled adults often inherit the belief that the school system or

the provisional institutions for further learning do not offer a learning environment that caters for their learning needs, and that they are left to fend for themselves. Such a reaction could increase the likelihood that they begin to feel helpless in the face of transitions and this, ultimately, could lead to social exclusion. Under these circumstances it is a challenge to motivate these individuals to participate in training and adult education to improve their employability. They have a considerable individual and social need for personal and/or collective support for completing relevant work-related training or education programmes.

The main psychological problem occurring in this situation is an identity defence. There persists a more or less unconscious urge to cling to a professional identity (or another identity) that has formerly been the basis of their self-respect and dignity (Kirpal and Rauner, 2007). Therefore, participation in education often only takes place if there is an emotional identification with the learning context. Continuing education or retraining must be offered and conducted in ways that respect the existing identity at the same time as a new identity is gradually built up.

If those from disadvantaged backgrounds do get into work with learning potential, then work-related socialisation plays a key role in subsequent identity formation, helping individuals develop an occupational orientation, work attachment and commitment (Heinz, 1995; 2003). As work-related identities are becoming increasingly unstable and disrupted (Carruthers and Uzzi, 2000), unfolding experiences at work can be mapped in terms of patterns of relationships, orientations and adaptive responses to work through individuals' strategic biographies (Brown, 2004). Brown (1997) identified how three key sets of relationships operate between the individual and the context in shaping identities in work settings: the nature of the work activities themselves and the extent to which the individual finds them challenging, changing, rewarding, etc., the nature of interactions with other people related to work and the extent to which the individual receives recognition, support, establishes friendships, etc., and identity issues – not only how the individual sees herself or himself but also how far this influences motivation and commitment.

Adult education has often failed to address the specific concerns of this target group as it resembles schooling. Therefore, educational measures have to be based on a better understanding of what low-skilled individuals' learning preferences are and what constitute adequate learning environments. Often individuals have held good jobs for many years through which they earned their living and social position, and which built the foundation for their identity. Losing one's job or returning to education often leads to a feeling of being somehow misplaced. Individuals in these situations feel it is unfair and infantilising that they have to go back to school and to the subordinate position of a pupil.

This study therefore focuses on two dimensions: low socioeconomic background and low-educated – leading to a status of low-skilled at the labour market. The target group of the study was not those in low-skilled employment per se, but rather Europeans with few initial formal qualifications, who may have experienced problems participating and being active in society ([2]). The group of low-skilled workers studied refers to males and females in the age group of 25 to 40 years. They have left school early or finished the lowest compulsory school degree and come from a low socioeconomic background. Individuals might have been unemployed or underemployed in low-skilled jobs, which had an effect on their sense of stability and earnings in life.

To understand how an individual's beliefs about education are formed and how they determine one's career pathway as well as one's reengagement in the learning process, narrative inquiry has been used as a scientific methodology in this Cedefop study. Narratives describe the wide variety of reasons for engagement or non-engagement in learning, perceptions and experiences of life/career transitions. The use of a narrative approach necessarily involves a small purposive sample.

The policy focus on employability, up-skilling and successful career transitions, however, firmly embeds the present study in the labour market. Occasionally a career transition is a self-initiated process, something desired and hoped for. Usually such a transition involves the intentional planning of a preferred future, the setting of a goal and the steady movement towards it. In other cases, a transition is triggered by perceptions derived from one's acculturation in a particular social environment and the resulting resistance to learning and upward mobility. It remains a challenging task for governments to identify the range of individual needs among low-educated and low-skilled Europeans, who experience problems in participating and being active in society to support transition phases and promote successful careers.

This research study investigated how workers with few initial qualifications, often from a low socioeconomic background, view education and continuous learning. The study set out to investigate the attitudes towards learning of people with experience of work, which was often, but not always, relatively low-skilled. Using desk research and the collection and analysis of strategic learning and career narratives of 105 interviewees (with 57 follow up interviews) in seven

([2]) High skilled workers 'passing through' low-skilled employment, migrants from outside Europe and long-term unemployed were excluded as these groups were beyond the scope of this particular study.

countries (Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and the UK), the study sought to:

(a) identify common themes, approaches, ways and/or trajectories indicating how workers with few initial qualifications could be supported in their learning activities, career development, employability and career transitions;
(b) provide a more in-depth understanding of the variety of reasons for low-skilled workers' disengagement with education, continuous learning and their often limited or non-participation in a range of continuing learning activities. A contrast is also provided by presenting how some workers with few initial qualifications were able to develop their skills and build successful careers.

The study addresses the following issues:

(a) how individuals approach learning in their lives,
(b) obstacles to learning as well as the potential to overcome these obstacles,
(c) how lifelong learning can support social inclusion by integrating the results from the narrative accounts with those from the desk research,
(d) the combination of national, institutional and cultural context information (e.g. welfare policies, social policies, culture, etc.) to understand the analysis and interpretation of the narratives.

The study also aimed to understand better the various reasons why many of those in low-skilled employment were disengaged from education with their non-participation in formal learning. The study focuses on the accumulation of disadvantage for those, often from a low socioeconomic background, with limited educational achievements, especially those who go on to occupy low-skilled positions in the labour market. The participants comprised males and females in the 25 to 40 age group who had a history of working in jobs requiring few formal qualifications.

CHAPTER 2.

Setting the scene

2.1. At risk with low skills

The OECD skills survey (OECD, 2013) pays particular attention to the trap of low skills, low-paid employment leading to limited access to further education and training; the continuing influence of parental class, status and education upon adult skills development; and the ways in which participation in learning activities may bring about important labour market and social outcomes. The OECD survey of adult skills (part of the programme for the international assessment of adult competences, PIAAC) assessed the proficiency of adults from age 16 onwards in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments (OECD, 2013, p.25). The report highlights how individuals with poor literacy and numeracy skills are more likely to find themselves at risk: 'poor proficiency in information-processing skills limits adults' access to many basic services, to better-paying and more-rewarding jobs, and to the possibility of participating in further education and training, which is crucial for developing and maintaining skills over the working life and beyond' (p. 27).

Average literacy levels were not high in the seven participating countries, with only the Czech Republic (slightly) above average. 'In Italy and Spain, for example, only one in 20 adults is proficient at the highest level of literacy (level 4 or 5). Nearly three of 10 adults in these countries perform at/or below the lowest level of proficiency (level 1) in both literacy and numeracy' (OECD, 2013, p. 28). Social background has a strong impact on literacy skills in some countries, including 'in England/Northern Ireland (UK), Germany, Italy and Poland. […] In these countries more so than in others, the children of parents with low levels of education have significantly lower proficiency than those whose parents have higher levels of education, even after taking other factors into account' (OECD, 2013, p. 30).

The results of this OECD survey clearly indicate how low-skilled workers often lack the essential basic skills required by employers. One of the major policy challenges is therefore how to re-engage low-skilled workers in adult education to improve their proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving. This needs to be achieved by easing access or allowing for the transition into a wide range of educational providers. However, these measures alone will not essentially change the situation, as will be outlined in this chapter.

2.2. Socioeconomic background, education and employment

Research has shown that parental class, parental status and parental education have independent effects on an individual's educational attainment (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2013; Erikson, 2012). When taken together, they create wide disparities in the eventual educational attainment of individuals who, in early life, were placed at similar levels of cognitive ability (Bukodi et al., 2013; Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles, 2005; Richards et al., 2009; Schoon, 2010). The effects of social class are long lasting. According to Bukodi et al. (2013) in the British case 'the importance of social origins for educational success increases with ability' (p. 34) and 'even individuals at the highest ability levels are unable to transcend the effects of their social origins so far as their educational attainment is concerned' (p. 35). Evidence found in Germany indicates that family background (socioeconomic status and education of parents) has an enormous influence on the educational results of students (PISA, 2009; Schindler and Lörz, 2011). During the life course typically this influence gets stronger, that is, the influence of parents' education is highest on the participation rate in adult education (see PIAAC results – OECD, 2013). Social inequalities in aspirations and attainment in terms of school performance, labour market transitions and subsequent outcomes continue over one's life (Bynner, 2001; Evans, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Jones, 2002; Schoon, 2006). Early career decisions are influenced by an individual's prior experiences, family and school context as well as by socioeconomic conditions and opportunity structures (Roberts, 2009). Evans et al. (2010) highlight how 'young people from less privileged family backgrounds are more likely than their privileged peers to leave school early and are less likely to participate in further and higher education' (p. 8). The latter are much less likely to experience extended periods of unemployment or job loss, which are also linked to lasting negative scarring effects on employment and earnings (Clark et al., 2001). The mechanism here is presumably that family socialisation has instilled the value of learning and this becomes most apparent in settings which are primarily voluntary. That many individuals of disadvantaged social origins do not realise their potential within the national schooling system raises the question of how best to support them when they subsequently enter the employment arena. This has consequences for continuing education and training which needs to be attractive to those who need it the most. However, if primary socialisation within the family has not instilled a belief in the value of education, then simply offering an attractive array of adult education opportunities is unlikely to recruit such adults. To bring about change in this area action needs

to be taken on changing the attitudes of these adults which requires thorough work on identity development.

The effects of parental class and socioeconomic effects on school achievements and career progress later in life differ between countries. Accounts from eastern Europe draw a historically specific picture upon the situation. In the Czech Republic, for example, the communist regime reduced inequalities in access to secondary education as a whole, but did not change the access criteria for the gymnasium (secondary grammar school) that prepares for higher education. Therefore, existing inequalities in access to higher education and more prestigious jobs remained (Matějů et al., 2007a; 2007b; Simonová and Soukup, 2009; 2010). After 1989, the initial level of inequality in the Czech Republic was the same as in countries of western Europe. The reinforcement of links between education, employment and income as well as the growth of income inequalities stimulated the motivation to acquire higher education degrees. However, intergenerational educational fluidity did not change in Czech society between 1990 and 2003, but only increased slightly between 2004 and 2009 due to the institutional changes and widening adult education (Katrňák and Simonová, 2011).

Family background (economic, education of parents) has a strong influence on educational achievement in Germany (Dalhaus, 2010; Fribel, 2010; Haunberger and Teubner, 2008; McElvany et al., 2009; PISA, 2009; Schindler and Lörz, 2011; Schlicht, 2011). During the life course, typically this influence gets stronger, i.e. the influence of parents' education is highest on the participation rate in adult education (OECD, 2013). The tripartite structure of the general education system in Germany (*Hauptschule*, *Realschule* and *Gymnasium*) separates students early on into different tracks, which mostly predetermine career pathways, with a strong presentation of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds found in the *Hauptschule*. Although, the system foresees transitions between the three strands, most students graduate from the type of school to which they have been assigned (Blossfeld et al., 2011; Schindler and Lörz, 2011).

2.3. School experience, attainment and attitudes to formal education: effects on skill development later in life

Besides family background, early school experience seems to affect attitudes to adult participation in education and training, which are further shaped by structural conditions, such as labour market opportunities (Ecclestone et al.,

2009; Gorard et al., 2002; Gorard and Rees, 2002; Klindt and Sørensen, 2010). The effects of both vary at times according to social background, gender, race, location, and personal competences. Other structural barriers might include domestic situation (time for family), commuter and working hours (Park, 1994). While opportunity structures are generally rational factors, individuals have a subjective perception of opportunity structures, including notions of what they believe is appropriate (Gorard et al., 2001). Depending on the accessibility and availability of opportunity structures, but also on how they are communicated, the effects on individuals' perception of agency differ. Findings from the UK suggest that one consequence of a highly structured, but increasingly 'illegible', labour market (Sennett, 1998) can foster a belief that 'opportunities are open to all' and make individuals blame themselves for their failures in education and the labour market. In the highly structured German system, external factors can more easily be held responsible for failure, giving individuals greater scope to develop a positive sense of self in early adult life' (Evans et al., 2010, p. 10). There are, however, significant variations between regions in and across countries.

Research has highlighted the importance of the social and affective dimension to learning in vocational education and training (VET) and how tutor-student and peer relationships were central to many aspects of learning and development for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Nash et al., 2008). For such students whose previous experience of education has been discouraging or who regard themselves as academically less able, learning is enriched by tapping into the everyday literacies of the students, especially as these students sometimes have difficulties with the literacy requirements of their courses. However, these perceived deficits hide skills that could be used as resources for improving learning. Both students and tutors typically talk of literacy in terms of what students cannot do, and yet in their everyday lives these apparently disadvantaged students use a wide range of literacies to deal with hobbies and interests, culture, shopping, modern technology and the complexities of modern life. Ivanic et al. (2007) mapped students' literacy practices and the literacy requirements of their courses and discovered there was an overlap, a set of 'border literacies' that could be harnessed and adapted to help students in their learning and development.

Research by Jephcote and Salisbury (2007) revealed a complex picture of students' learning journeys, the interplay between college and their wider lives and how post-compulsory education and training also contributed to the wider benefits of learning. Learning is influenced by social and economic factors beyond the classroom. Students gain more benefits from college life than qualifications, important though these are. Gallacher et al. (2007) also point to the significance of social relationships in learning cultures in community-based

colleges and practices that increase students' re-engagement with learning. James and Biesta (2007) argue that, at its best, VET builds on these learning cultures to encourage and challenge students to go beyond their existing dispositions and undergo personal change as well as acquiring knowledge. Learning cultures in VET derive from the interactions of complex sets of relationships, with students and tutors contributing varying sets of beliefs, attitudes and experiences.

European policy now seeks to support the development of resilience in workers, who should be able to overcome set-backs, engage in continuous learning and, if necessary, individual reinvention (Council of the European Union, 2008; Field, 2009). An individual's career development is no longer viewed as linear and hierarchical, but multifaceted, unstable, cyclical, and transitional over the life-course (Bimrose et al., 2004; Hearne, 2012; Savickas, 2001). Any type of major life event or significant organisational or occupational change can disrupt an individual's accustomed lifestyle in a way that may require certain coping strategies (Bimrose et al., 2011). So a key focus of policy to support low-skilled workers is to help individuals to be resilient so that they might navigate better volatile labour markets (Bimrose et al., 2008; Hearne, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009; Sultana, 2011).

Determinants of later participation in lifelong learning are different, reflecting the individual's context and access to learning, including through their work. For many learners their identities are rooted in prior experiences of education, particularly in schooling (Gorard and Rees, 2002). The imposing character of school-based instruction might be rejected. However, some adults are more open to engaging with a range of different types of learning to enhance their skill development (Taylor and Spencer, 1994).

Poor school performance can lead to a subsequent lack of confidence or fear of failure, but for other individuals if poor performance was due to poor motivation then in some cases an increase in overall drive or motivation, inherent interest, a desire for personal or career development could spark a willingness to re-engage with education and training at a later stage (Taylor and Spencer, 1994, p. 23). The motivation to learn and the characteristics of the learners could be influential in attitudes towards participation in education and training. The nature of the provision could also be important, depending on, for example, the possible benefits (increased job satisfaction, better job prospects, personal satisfaction); who pays and financial benefits; form of learning (work-based; self-directed; e-learning, etc.); access issues (cost, timing, location, etc.); or whether the learning leads to qualifications (Park, 1994). Individuals could be more inclined to take part if relevant information would be easily available, such as type of programmes, financial incentives, inspiring stories of success, experience of

advice and guidance (Park, 1994). Concerns about the feasibility of attending further training or return to education include the cost of provision, perceived risk of failure compared to possible benefits and how to manage work, family and education (Hand et al., 1994). Another fear among mid-career adults is related to age considerations and that training would be for young people (Taylor and Spencer, 1994).

Overall, school performance can have significant effects on subsequent attitudes towards learning. It might also constrain occupational choice, transition pathways to employment and the types of vocational identity development on offer, with those performing well at school generally having a much wider selection of opportunities from which to choose. Individuals with fewer formal qualifications from initial education and training may therefore need to craft their vocational identities in other ways. Work-related socialisation can play a key role in that process, helping individuals develop an occupational orientation, work attachment and commitment.

2.4. The role of academic tenacity, agency, perseverance, motivation and positive mindsets in achieving career goals

Farrington et al. (2012) studied non-cognitive factors influencing the ways in which 'students interact with the educational context within which they are situated and the effects of these interactions on attitudes, motivation, and performance' (p.2). Cognitive and non-cognitive factors interact in dynamic ways (Borghans et al., 2008) to shape learning in formal educational settings (Bransford et al., 2000), and school performance may then influence subsequent attitudes to learning, formal education and training environments. In this view, all forms of cognition, including learning, interact with the context in which it occurs, 'including the environment, perception, action, affect, and sociocultural systems' (Barsalou, 2010, p. 325).

Personal agency can be used to describe the extent to which individuals are proactive in respect to their reengagement in education later in life (Bandura, 2001; 2006). Personal agency is interlinked with self-efficacy and requires that the individual visualises a future which may be different from the predicted path. For personal agency to be effective in an adaptive change process, four connected conditions must be met: intentionality; forethought; self-reactiveness and self-reflection (Bandura, 2006). These help the individual to understand their situation and strategically move towards a set goal, which requires navigating their life within particular opportunity structures. Agency is particularly relevant in

today's vibrant labour markets: 'In the modern workplace, workers have to take charge of their self-development for a variety of positions and careers over the full course of their work-life. They have to cultivate multiple competences to meet the ever-changing occupational demands and roles' (Bandura, 2001, p. 11).

The key challenge for teachers is to support students to become 'active learners who can manage their workload, assess their progress and status, persist in difficult tasks, and develop a reliable set of strategies to master increasingly complex academic content as they proceed through school' (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 5). Now, if for any reason students do not develop these skills, attitudes and behaviours at school, then they will probably need to develop at least some of these to be successful in an employment context.

Additionally, 'there is also a reciprocal relationship among mindsets, perseverance, behaviours, and performance. Strong academic performance 'validates' positive mindsets, increases perseverance, and reinforces strong academic behaviours. Note that this reciprocal, self-perpetuating system also works in a negative loop. Negative mindsets stifle perseverance and undermine academic behaviours, which results in poor academic performance. Poor performance, in turn, reinforces negative mindsets, perpetuating a self-defeating cycle' (p. 9).

One key aspect of a positive mind-set is a feeling of belonging to a community of learners (Oyserman et al., 2002). Some individuals do not 'fit' with a school ethos but may be successful in other learning contexts, including other educational settings. Much initial work in some further education, community education or adult education classes is spent trying to rebuild some learners' fragile learning identities which were a result of the lack of a feeling of belonging to academic communities at school (Crossan et al., 2003; Gallacher et al., 2002; Jephcote and Salisbury, 2008; Jephcote et al., 2009). Tutors seek to re-engage learners and develop a social milieu which will align personal, institutional, and structural factors to rebuild an individual's confidence in their learning career and overcome previous elements of hostility to education, as well as in some cases a degree of denial of personal responsibility. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2002) and Hodkinson et al. (2004) argue that learner identities are also important in relation to understanding a worker's attitudes towards participating in work-based learning.

Another aspect of a positive mind-set is to have a growth mind-set. In a fixed mind-set, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. In a growth mind-set, people believe that their basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work: brains and talent are just the starting point. This view can create a commitment to learning and a resilience that facilitates effective performance (Dweck, 2006).

Resilience can be seen as a crucial component of emotional competences, coming into play in difficult situations which require self-control based not only on accrued defences but also on a creative relationship with the external conditions. Resilience includes important social and cognitive traits, related to the abilities of maintaining both solidarity relations and sense-making regarding the contingencies of the context. It must be underlined that this kind of approach to competences has been successfully transplanted from its organisational (corporate) origins to much wider contexts, including education and guidance. The so-called life skills approach is, in fact, aimed at supporting initiatives for the development of self-reflection and the diffusion of pro-social behaviours (Senatoreet al., 2010). Developing resilience as part of a strategy of wider emotional development could help heal some of the problems associated with low learning scarring.

Figure 1. **Personal agency infrastructure**

Source: Cedefop.

Another feature of a positive mindset is whether the individual believes the activity has value, be that intrinsically or in terms of attainment or utility value (Eccles et al., 1983). Those who do well in terms of academic performance, display academic tenacity: the 'mindsets and skills that allow students to look beyond short-term concerns to longer-term or higher-order goals, and withstand challenges and setbacks to persevere toward these goals' (Dweck et al., 2011, p.

4). Duckworth et al. (2007) highlight the importance of grit, which they define as 'perseverance and passion for long-term goals' (p. 1087) as individuals displayed consistency of interests and persistence of effort.

Mindsets are important but they are not simply characteristics of individuals. They are the product of the interaction between individual students and educational contexts, rather than being predetermined characteristics of individual students (Deci, 1992; Hattie et al., 1996; Stipek, 2001; Wang et al., 1994). A US National Research Council study highlighted how positive engagement and self-efficacy in school learning was contingent upon creating 'a set of circumstances in which students take pleasure in learning and come to believe that the information and skills they are being asked to learn are important and meaningful for them, worth their effort, and that they can reasonably expect to be able to learn the material' (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 14).

For students in what they perceive as a negative school context, a negative loop can be set up between academic mindsets, academic behaviour, and academic performance. While, ideally taking place in school, breaking that vicious cycle by changing mindsets can lead to improvements in performance (Yeager and Walton, 2011). As well as through developing positive mindsets, individuals will be more effective as learners if they use learning strategies which incorporate metacognition, self-regulated learning, time management, and goal setting (Farrington et al., 2012, p.39). Some adults recognised that they did not apply themselves at school and that they did not realise the significance of the decisions they made at the time and as adults experienced 'a profound sense of regret: 'If only I'd have known then what I know now'' (Taylor and Spencer, 1994).

Bimrose and Hearne (2012) examined how disadvantaged clients of guidance services in the UK and Ireland demonstrated varying levels of resilience and adaptability in managing adversity at various points in their career development. For some, poor health, low self-efficacy expectations, lack of employment opportunities in their local labour markets, changes of personal priorities, and the lack of institutional support contributed to them 'giving-up' on their education and career aspirations. In contrast, for others, these types of barriers were not an issue, suggesting that a strong commitment to an ultimate career goal can be fruitful if an individual is resilient and develops career adaptability over time. From the comparative study of adults in Norway and the UK, evidence of career adaptability is associated with a range of benefits (Bimrose et al., 2011). For example, it supports vocational and competence development, as well as the motivation for individuals to develop intellectually and personally (Creed et al., 2009).

For low-skilled adults to progress professionally over the course of their lives it is essential to maintain or develop a positive growth-oriented mindset that supports performance in school. If absent, the willingness to engage with subsequent opportunities for learning and development is low. Therefore, fostering positive mindsets towards learning is vital for employment. Another characteristic that needs to be nurtured is perseverance to get through difficult times, overcome barriers and steadily continue on a learning path.

Literature, mainly developed within the labour economics area, hinges on the concept of the 'scar' that affects people experiencing youth unemployment, long-term unemployment and/or wage reductions (World Economic Forum, 2014; ILO, 2011; OECD, 2012b). As is the case with ideas such as 'poverty cycles', concepts like 'unemployment scarring', or 'wage scarring' or the 'scarred generation' tend to depict situations in which negative reinforcing loops are in place. Their effect is evident when an initial event or condition (e.g. a job loss or an initial difficulty in entering the labour market) unleashes subsequent effects which hinder the acquisition of an at least acceptable status in the labour market, in society and – ultimately – in life. In particular, the 'scarring' issue is very much characteristic of the problem of those not in employment, education or training which now plagues all western economies, particularly those of the Mediterranean area. One important question therefore is whether negative early learning experiences can also lead to 'scarring' in the sense that they continue to have a negative effect later in life.

Learning agency represents the learning capabilities possessed by an individual and enacted in her/his work and other activities. It can be seen as integrating different components, the first of which is formed of a sound background of knowledge and abilities, mostly acquired within formal education. Literacy and numeracy as investigated within the PIAAC international project (OECD, 2013) are fundamental terms of reference from this viewpoint. However, learning agency includes further aspects: a second component comprises the abilities which allow continuous learning even in informal/practical environments, in particular within working contexts. Learning also includes the ability to deal with composite non-formal knowledge intertwined with operational skills acquired through practice, which give rise to a real understanding and mastery of the activity, including its technological and relational underpinnings (Gherardiand Strati, 2012). Developing learning agency can therefore be an essential task to possibly overcoming the effects of low-learning scarring.

The components of learning agency do not exhaust the range of factors needed for living, or even surviving in the modern world. Learning cannot by itself support the actions and choices (agency) that constitute the fabric of an individual's participation in social life and facilitate the attainment of individual

goals, needs and aspirations. Learning always has to be supported by a personal infrastructure that can be explained in terms of competences. The latter represent the conditions for the implementation of formal and non-formal learning in work and life contexts as they include the most fundamental characteristics of action: knowledge of action (knowing how to act), motivation to action (wanting to act) and responsibility for action (being able to act) (Le Boterf, 2013). Competences are nothing more than capabilities or abilities. They become manifest through different sets of behaviours organised around an underlying construct, which we can be referred to as intent. The behaviours are alternate manifestations of the intent, as appropriate in various situations or times (Boyatzis, 2008; 2011). In this behavioural view, competences are articulated as aspects of three different types of intelligence: cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence and social intelligence. Cognitive competences are those allowing both simple but fundamental activities such as memorising, calculating, etc., and more complex activities such as thinking in systemic terms, identifying recurrent patterns in sequences of data and events. Social competences are those that allow viable interactions and promote effective forms of social interaction and cooperation. Emotional competences, in their turn, and strictly linked to the other two, are those, hinging on awareness of self and others, through which it is possible to choose appropriate reactions to different situations and to positively influence others when requested (Goleman et al., 2002).

2.5. The effects of lifelong learning on labour market outcomes and social life

Past participation in non-formal education influences the willingness for participation in the future (Rabušicová and Rabušic, 2006). Non-formal learning, taking place both at the workplace but also outside it, can trigger engagement in learning among low-skilled adults. One way of learning for the low-skilled is through upgrading skills via job changes (Brynin and Longhi, 2007). The new job brings new interactions with colleagues and might also entail new work processes. Upgrading skills often leads to better jobs and more job security (Scarpetta, 2012). Being in low-skilled employment is not necessarily problematic for a person's longer-term prospects but staying in such employment most certainly is (Bynner and Parsons, 1997). Therefore low-skilled adults need support in upgrading their skills.

Apparently low-skilled work can still offer opportunities for substantive learning and development. For example, at first sight driving a van delivering sandwiches for small businesses may seem relatively undemanding. However,

the van driver may play a key role for the company in establishing a rapport with customers and his/her 'influencing skills' could make a significant difference to sales (Felstead et al., 2009). This example also demonstrates how, when a job is expanded to incorporate more complex tasks and duties, this provides opportunities for the development of higher levels of skills, knowledge and understanding at work. Similarly, any work role involving customer service can be treated as challenging. Some retail banks actively encourage applications from people who are good at engaging customers, even if they are performing low-skilled work in, for example, burger chains, as managers think it is easier to develop the necessary technical skills than the 'soft skills' of interacting well with customers (Nickson et al., 2005).

Work-related training can be an important means of upskilling employees. However, the problem for employees in low-skilled jobs is gaining access to such training – the more highly skilled you are already, the more likely you are to be provided with such training. Some organisations operate 'skills escalators' where all employees are able to access training which will equip them with the skills to at least compete for more highly skilled work (McBride et al., 2006). Such schemes have had some success, although take up can be limited, particularly when training takes place in your own time, or because of other barriers to engagement with training, including issues around self-confidence, learning identities, time, cost and other responsibilities (McNair, 2010).

An alternative approach facilitated by some organisations or by individuals themselves is to engage with education opportunities not directly related to their current employment. Some organisations offer access to education and training opportunities for all employees as part of an employee development scheme or adult basic skills provision targeted at those in low-skilled employment, often with the support of a trade union or an external educational institution or other learning provider (Wolf and Evans, 2010). The individual may also act independently and choose to take a (part-time) course while continuing to work without any employer support.

The tradition for participation in post-compulsory education and training is generally strong in the Nordic countries, including Denmark (Cedefop, 2013). This includes the degree of participation in adult education among low-skilled workers, although the degree of participation for this group is lower than for other groups (Cedefop, 2012b; Rosdahl et al., 2013). This tendency applies both to formal and informal learning activities (Dæhlen and Ure, 2009, p. 661). However, over a lifetime, skilled persons spend on average twice as much time on vocational education than non-skilled persons while persons with a higher education spend on average four times as much time on further education

compared with both skilled and non-skilled persons (Pihl and Baadsgaard, 2012, p. 8).

Several Nordic studies have focused on low-skilled workers' aspirations regarding adult education and barriers for participation. Motivation seems high when learning is related to (continued) personal development and supports job security or promotion (Kondrup, 2012; Rubenson et al, 1976; Trepartsudvalget, 2006b). Engagement in learning is often preferred in relatively short and practice-oriented courses which offer updated qualifications for one's current position (Trepartsudvalget, 2006, p. 345). Correspondingly, personal revenue-funding and support from employers are the most important conditions for participation in training among the low-skilled (Gravdahl and Lanke, 2010; Trepartsudvalget, 2006).

However, lack of replacement for the employee attending a course or a study programme, time deficit and lack of financial compensation are barriers for low-skilled workers' engagement in formal learning (Trepartsudvalget, 2006, p. 355 et seq.). Additionally, the belief that one will not succeed (VOX, 2007, p. 21), sometimes based on insufficient literacy skills (Trepartsudvalget, 2006, p. 292), lack of relevant education programmes (Danish Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 23), little knowledge about educational options (Bekkevold and Bergane, 2011, p. 15 et seq.) or low quality of courses (Rabušicová and Rabušic (2006) are barriers to reengagement in education.

Rabušicová and Rabušic (2006) distinguish two more groups of reasons for not engaging in further education:

(a) dispositional barriers:
    (i) value of education is not seen;
    (ii) fear of failure;
    (iii) fear that prior education is insufficient;
(b) situational barriers:
    (i) lack of sufficient financial resources;
    (ii) difficulties with timing;
    (iii) other interests;
    (iv) family obligations;
    (v) health-related reasons.

Further barriers outlined by Horáková and Rákoczyová (2003) are uncertain outcomes of training programmes, especially in respect to employment prospects and a prevalent more traditional attitude towards work where the job has priority over training programmes.

There are also country-specific constraints for low-educated adults. In Poland, for example, provision of education beyond compulsory education is

concentrated in the larger academic centres in cities (Przyszczypkowski, 1999), and mobility of individuals living in rural areas is limited. With the political changes in 1990 and the privatisation of the industry, many adults lost their jobs and entered unemployment, a phenomenon unknown (or at least unobserved) before 1989. One State response was the establishment of provincial and regional job centres. Since the political changes, a large variety of adult-education providers has emerged, but the quality of programmes differs widely and little transparency exists regarding the usefulness of the degrees and certificates they offer, a development also typical for the Czech Republic (Hamplová and Simonová, 2014).

Finally, employers and the State can act at various levels to support the engagement of low-skilled workers in lifelong learning not just through formal provision of training and adult-education classes but also through recognition of informal learning. Particular attention needs to be paid to the various obstacles currently in place within the countries to increase participant rates.

2.6. Support structures for continuing vocational education and training

Early leaving from education and training can be traced back to ruptures in at least one of the social structures supporting sustained engagement with learning at crucial junctures in life. Ruptures may originate in the social sphere (social or family background not supportive enough) or in the educational system (which might not have been supportive or flexible enough to accommodate individual idiosyncrasies). Negative experiences with initial education may lead to the onset of a fatalistic outlook and to diminished expectations from re-engaging in education and training later in life. Low-educated workers' attitudes may sap their willingness to pursue educational choices over time.

The lack of personal agency that is sometimes experienced and expressed by low-skilled workers is linked to the stigma employers sometimes attach to low -educated workers (as being low-ability workers) which hinders the low-educated workers' ability to escape low wages and low-skilled jobs. This feeling of helplessness becomes stronger during periods of high unemployment.

Therefore, low-educated workers' engagement with learning tends to be fragile and need to be nurtured and supported. As a consequence education and training initiatives aimed at the low-educated should be flexible enough to accommodate the wide range of learning profiles characterising this group. They should also support low-educated workers in the development of a sense of

ownership of the educational choices and in the development of a learning path to be followed over time.

Consequently, a system aimed at accompanying low-educated workers in their process of learning and upskilling will need to provide support at different junctures. Low-educated workers need to be supported at the time they re-engage in education and training, need support to sustain their engagement with learning (considering that low-educated workers will approach learning in a specific way), and finally need to be supported during the transition from the education and training institution to employment.

Among the seven countries examined in this study, the French system seems to offer the most differentiated, while at the same time integrated, approach to support CVET. Overall, perhaps the most distinctive part of the French system of CVET is how individuals have the right to access support in many different phases of the learning trajectory. France has also implemented a variety of measures to support low-skilled adults' engagement in further learning and their (re)integration into the labour market. The provision of paid leave (*congé*) of different types established by national policy ensures an employee has time and space for individual lifelong learning. This is over and above any continuous professional training which might be offered (or indeed required) by an employer.

The emphasis on individual choice within the overall framework for the provision of lifelong learning for employees shows a clear commitment to respecting the individual preferences of employees (Cedefop, 2008a). This is enshrined in 'Employee self-directed continual vocational training' and most clearly demonstrated in the *droit individuel à la formation* (DIF) translated here as the individual's right to training. The key vehicle for delivering the individual's right to training (the DIF) is the dedicated, individual training leave or *congé individuel de formation* (CIF). Paid leave is authorised for those wanting to validate their experiential learning through the *validation des aquis de l'expérience* (VAE) which is the formal process of accreditation. There is also an entitlement to individual career guidance with a professional; this guidance is offered over and above the advice provided by the public employment services (PES) through the *Pôle Emploi*; attention is also paid to the transferability and mobility of the individual training portfolio, across occupational sector and/or geographical region. ([3])

([3]) The *bilan de compétences* allows an individual to take stock of personal and professional aptitudes and competences. It also touches on motivation and encourages goal-setting in the context of career planning. The whole process is intended to allow the individual to bring everything together. The *bilan* offers

CHAPTER 3.

Methodology

The key purpose of the study was to extract common themes, approaches, ways and/or trajectories, representing how workers who leave initial education and training with few formal qualifications can be supported in their learning activities, career development, employability and career transitions. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted and undertaken by an inter-disciplinary research team. This team comprised: desk research to seek out literature on the learning

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something to employers too. Skills audits expose skills gaps or deficits, thus helping the employer better manage their human resources. There are three stages in the *bilan*: the preliminary stage offers information and individual guidance, the assessment stage comprises analysis and the construction of a *project professionel* (broadly speaking, a personal career/development plan) and the concluding stage tests out the viability of the career plan as demonstrated in achieving the desired outcome (as envisaged by the individual). Although the three stages are presented as sequential there is of course some overlapping and refinement particularly where stages two and three are concerned. The process of working on a personal skills audit can be, in and of itself, a valuable process of reflection and recognition; both of what has been mastered but also where gaps in know-how need to be plugged for successful navigation of a difficult labour market. The *bilan* does bring to light and bring together an individual's professional competences whether developed through paid or unpaid work, formal or informal learning and strengthen their subsequent application for work or training. It can also lead to the *validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE), that is the formal accreditation of prior and or experiential learning, which comprises four stages. The preliminary stage is one of information and guidance, usually involving one-to-one interviews with qualified career guidance professionals. The second 'feasibility' stage is intended to weed out hopelessly unrealistic cases by weighing up the likely portfolio claim against a specific course or programme of study at a specific training or educational institution. The third stage of portfolio-building, while driven primarily by the individual concerned, should be accompanied by a career professional and also draw on advice and supervision from the validating institution. In the fourth and final stage, a jury is convened to examine the portfolio in support of the claim and to interview the candidate. This should lead to formal validation. Paid leave is available for employees who want to work towards VAE. Unemployed candidates would get financial support either from the public employment service *Pôleemploi* and or their region. The flip side of the VAE is where someone has achieved a qualification but cannot secure employment because they have no experience. In this case, they can draw on the *contrat d'accompaniement à l'emploi* (CAE) or access to work contract (Cedefop, 2008a, p. 39) is a three-way contract for supported employment agreed between employer, public employment services (PES) and the individual. The individual is taken on in effect as a supernumerary employee, for a period of six months which can be renewed up to a maximum of 24 months, paid at least the minimum wage, with the salary costs shared between PES and employer.

pathways and experience of the low skills and empirical research to gather and analyse strategic career and learning biographies. The methodology draws and builds upon the successful experience of the approach adopted in the 2012-13 'Learning for career and labour market transitions – individual biographies' project (Cedefop, 2014a).

3.1. Desk research: literature review

The desk research was undertaken by the researchers in each of the seven countries. This approach allowed the seven countries' partners to identify and review the relevant literature, policy strategies, laws, regulations and statistical data available in their own countries, which helped inform the development of the interview protocols and data analyses. The main aim of the literature review was to seek findings on learning as well as resistance to learning among workers with few qualifications from their initial education and training and the extent of the links to socioeconomic background. In addition, it identified best practices to include these groups in learning activities and/or qualifying programmes. The desk research provides accounts of research, policy and practice, which were used to construct an integrative European literature review (Section 2.1). The findings from the literature review informed and complemented the core project research of biographical narrative interviews. It also informed the development of the interview guide. Work on the literature review continued throughout the research process to address new issues emerging from the interviews and to ensure it was kept up to date with new research and policy.

3.2. Empirical research: narrative interviews focusing on strategic career and learning biographies

A narrative interview method was adopted for the empirical research, as it had been successfully used in previous research (Cedefop, 2014a) and aligns with other research on the role of adult learning and development in labour market transitions (Field, 2012; Field et al., 2009; Ecclestone et al., 2009). The aim of this approach was to draw out the key strategic career and learning biographies of the target population (Brown et al., 2010). A strategic learning biography tracks substantive changes in values, attitudes, behaviour and/or understanding, rather than just the reflexive small adaptations to everyday life. It encompasses all forms of learning: both planned or unplanned (non-formal learning); in formal or informal settings; in all types of learning situations (social, workplace, schools or training providing institutions); for personal or work-related purposes; from

interactions with all kinds of people (teachers, trainers, mentors, colleagues, peers, and friends).

The low-skilled are particularly vulnerable to labour market change which can sometimes be very unpredictable and risky for them (Bauman, 2005). Learning, both planned and unplanned, inside and outside the workplace, has become a mechanism and a process in the transition from one type of job to another. The transitions which an individual experiences may be through choice or imposed externally. The latter may have implications for the way an individual experiences and copes with the transition and learning and their attitudes towards it (Glastra et al., 2004). Field (2000) points out that education in adult life becomes both a resource for individuals seeking to promote their employability and mobility, and at the same time, a cause of further uncertainty and risk (Field, 2000, p. 1).

As individuals move into and through the labour market their work-related identities change too as part of a dynamic and dialectical process between structure and agency (Brown, 1997; Brown and Bimrose, 2015). The model of learning for career and labour market transitions developed in the previous Cedefop project and the model underpins the methodology for the current project. This project, however, has a distinctly different target group, so additional topics such as the development of resilience for the low-skilled was investigated here. European policy now seeks to support the development of resilience in workers to overcome set-backs (Council of the European Union, 2008). One theme of the research was to seek to accommodate the dual issues of resiliency and career adaptability (Bimrose and Hearne, 2012).

Strategic career and learning biographies enable the voices of participants to be heard, placing them as central to the research process as they reflect upon, interpret and give meaning to their work and learning experiences within their social context, which was central to the research. Throughout the process, the researchers placed emphasis on building a secure, collaborative relationship, to listen and work respectfully with the participants (see also Stanley and Wise, 1993). This approach also gave importance to the research itself as a form of learning.

Interview protocols including a participant consent form, participant information sheet and a research interview guide and protocol were drafted and finalised in consultation with partners. Each country partner took responsibility for gaining ethical approval for the research from their institution. The interview themes were generated discussed and agreed at a partner meeting and were informed by the country literature reviews. The common interview themes and subthemes were used by the researchers as a guide to the areas to be explored in the interviews.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants through the signing of a consent form. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity so key identifiers have been changed and participants are referred to by pseudonyms. Where agreed with the participants, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Where this was not possible, a written record of the interview was produced including verbatim quotes. The interviews followed guidelines for thematic narrative interviews, which were semi-structured and covered the themes outlined in the interview guide. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. The interviews were undertaken in a variety of locations convenient to the participant. A total of 15 narrative interviews were conducted in the seven countries participating in the research, including: Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Poland and the UK. Therefore, 105 narrative interviews were undertaken. The focus of the interviews was on understanding individual career and learning experiences, with narratives which link past, present and possible future career transitions and labour market experiences. The stories revealed collective experiences and contextual detail. Interviews were informal and open, allowing participants to talk without interruption. Prompts were used from the interview guide when required. Eight participants (nine in Italy) from each country were re-interviewed around one year after their initial interview (57 follow up interviews in total). These interviews were shorter in length and focused on a progress report, especially where there has been significant change since the first interview. The second interviews also provided an opportunity for checking as the interview reflected on what was said in the first interview as well as moving on to looking at what has happened since then.

Purposive and snowball sampling were adopted by the research teams to ensure that the participants met the following criteria:

(a) aged 25 to 40 years, ideally with half the cases under 32 years and half over 32 years (this was deemed advisable because some people have extended transitions into employment and the two groups may have very different experiences of how easy or difficult it was to enter the labour market before and after the crisis of 2008);
(b) employment status to be employed, unemployed (but not long-term unemployed) or underemployed, but must have had a minimum of five-years employment experience, or could be engaged with 'black/grey/informal' labour market;
(c) to be raised in households with below average income and cultural capital; working in fields where their current income was below average; or in low wages occupations;
(d) educational level to be compulsory education and lower (perhaps dropped out), or no qualifications with a real labour market value above EQF level 3.

Of the sample, there needed to be an equal distribution of men and women as possible, living in rural and urban areas to represent the different labour markets. The respondents could have worked in any sector of the economy, and they should have experienced their initial education and training in one of the seven countries involved in the study.

Various approaches were adopted by the research teams to identify potential research participants, such as approaching support services, job centres, trade unions, guidance and counselling services, and education and training providers. There were some difficulties in reaching the target population in all countries. Problems included: institutions unable or unwilling to introduce potential participants to the research teams; distrust and reluctance of this group to participate in the research; and a difficultly to identify participants as many do not seek out help or access services. As a consequence, many of the research teams used social networks (and social media in Denmark) to identify and contact potential research participants.

The table below provides an overview of the distribution within the sample. Male and female participants were fairly equally represented. Participants were aged between 24 and 46. Six participants were over the age of 40. The large majority of the interviewees were in employment Participants have varying education, training and career-guidance experiences and work histories, in terms of the number and type of low-skilled jobs they have held. Overall, the sample represents a variety of career and learning pathways with which people from low-skilled, low educational attainment population in each country have engaged.

3.3. Data analyses

Transcriptions were produced where consent had been given by the participants for their interviews to be recorded. Detailed summaries with verbatim quotes were created for those interviews that were not recorded. The transcripts and summaries were analysed and coded using a common coding structure. For the follow-up interviews, researchers extended the initial interview summaries.

The data analysis was a dialogical, iterative and an interdisciplinary process.

Table 1. **Summary of participants by country**

Country (n=105)	GENDER		AGE				EMPLOYMENT STATUS					LOCATION	
			24-28	29-32	33-38	39-46	Employed	Unemployed	Self-employed	Education/ training	Unknown	Urban	Rural
Czech Republic	7	8	3	3	6	3	14				1	7	8
Denmark	5	10	6	1	6	2	10	2	1	1	1		
Germany	7	8	4	3	6	2	11	1	2	1		8	7
France	7	8	2	4	4	5	14 (3 on sick leave)	1				10	5
Italy	9	6	4	2	7	2	5	2	2	6		9	6
Poland	7	8	1	4	9	1	14	1				7	8
UK	8	7	6	4	4	1	15					8	7
TOTAL	50	55	26	21	42	16	83	7	5	8	2	49	41

Source: Cedefop.

The transcripts were read, re-read and coded using a common coding structure. The coding structure comprised the following major themes:

(a) engagement with learning;
(b) drivers for learning;
(c) perceptions of outcomes of learning;
(d) attitudes to adult learning;
(e) role of learning in future navigation;
(f) intrapersonal influences;
(g) employment opportunities;
(h) work activity and career progression;
(i) career decision-making;
(j) entrepreneurship;
(k) accreditation of prior learning.

Initially, each country research team coded five transcripts, which were reviewed and reflected upon at a team meeting. The coding framework was refined based on these discussions. The coding structure enabled researchers to add and use their own codes for a reoccurring theme or for issues that may be specific to their country and context. Each incident of a code in the transcript was recorded, which enabled a broader analysis of themes specific to the country. This process also provided an overview of the coding and ensured some consistency in the approach across the teams. Country research teams moderated their own coding. The number of interviews where codes were found was also calculated to provide an indication of prominent themes by country and as a whole.

Alongside this analysis, transcripts were also explored and analysed in terms of:

(a) attitudinal and structural obstacles and barriers to learning across the life-course (including the importance of learning for identity formation);
(b) how previous experiences with learning (in schools and possibly the decision to drop out) influence the decision to participate in subsequent education and training;
(c) aspirations and expectations of the outcomes of participation in education, training and guidance (including expectations related to possible labour market outcomes and how these may materialise);
(d) the ways in which learning did contribute to positive labour market outcomes;
(e) drivers for workers to engage in different forms of learning;
(f) a description of the learning experiences and specific learning characteristics/ environment considered useful by individuals;

(g) perception of one's skills and competences and their usefulness at the labour market;
(h) experiences with and attitudes towards planning, setting goals and objectives;
(i) experiences with and attitudes towards attempts to build resilience and adaptability.

The different types of pathways into, and potentially out of, low-skilled employment together with detail on the ways learning is viewed and approached, how skills and skill needs are perceived and how learning supports labour market transitions and upward social mobility are explored in the next section.

CHAPTER 4.

Narratives of learning

The focus of the study was how workers with few formal qualifications from initial education and training, often with a low socioeconomic background, think about education and continuous learning. One intention was to provide more in-depth understanding of the variety of reasons for their disengagement from education and continuous learning, and their often limited or non-participation in a range of continuing learning activities. To achieve this, the study investigated their perceptions of barriers to learning and drivers for learning; their experience of initial education and training; and the extent of their engagement with continuing education and training plus the implications of this for their future career direction. The findings of the research are examined in the following paragraphs.

4.1. Barriers to learning

A distinction is needed between the effect of low achievement and poor learning outcomes at school on future education, training and employment opportunities, and poor motivation, lack of interest, and poor attendance, which did not necessarily reflect underlying ability. As the interviews make clear, it is much easier to remedy the latter, but progress can also be made with the former if motivation and effort are in alignment.

The findings on barriers for learning are in line with the existing quantitative research (e.g. Rabušicová and Rabušic, 2006), but offer more detail on the perceptions and attitudes of the low-skilled towards learning, as well as some indication of how these attitudes develop. The focus of the research is on workers with few formal qualifications from initial education and training that subsequently followed trajectories involving low-skilled work. The dominant themes include low educational aspirations (often confirmed by difficulties in initial education), lack of engagement with schooling and the learning scars this often produced. Stipulating an identity of ‘low-skilled’ is perhaps problematic. Some recurrent beliefs seem to be connected to self-image (being a ‘practical person’, learning mostly through experience, not good in theory). The case of family obligations being more an attitudinal obstacle (motherhood as a priority) than a situational one (as usually interpreted in qualitative research) suggests, that situational barriers that often appear as dominant in qualitative research perhaps need to be reinterpreted in some cases. These barriers are sometimes a

secondary problem and the real obstacle that prevents a person from participating in education is connected to identity and self-image.

Narratives concerning lack of engagement with school display major differences from the reasons for lack of effective participation and its consequences. Some individuals face major attitudinal or structural barriers to participation in continuing education and training while, for others, a change in motivation is the key to effective engagement with post-compulsory learning opportunities.

4.1.1. Poor learning outcomes at school

Educational performance is often used as a screening device for access to skilled employment. Those with better school performance are better able to access further learning opportunities so the gaps between the educational achievement of those performing best and least well in initial education may continue to widen in the immediate post-school period. The Danish results from the PIAAC survey show clear correlation between the level of education and basic skills in literacy, numeracy and problem solving, meaning that those with low levels of educational achievement often continue to have lower skills later in life (Fridberget al., 2013, p. 123 et seq.).

A study in Denmark by Klindt and Sørensen (2010) indicated that there might also be a culture where individuals see themselves as 'illiterate', which accounts for the lack of motivation or engagement in education. The study argues that many low-skilled workers are not predisposed to choosing education as a means of improving their skills: they do not value education as applicable or useful in their particular context. They could even regard education as a kind of betrayal against their own cultural background if their family was also poorly qualified. Lack of success at school has not left a positive memory with them either (Klindt and Sørensen, 2010, p. 11 and p. 56). Also, low-educated workers seem to be hesitant to participate in courses preparing them for career transitions, fearing being socially excluded at the workplace (Trepartsudvalget, 2006, p. 195). The ambivalence in the situation, knowing that education is qualifying for future prospects but that engagement will leave the low-skilled in a vulnerable situation, is challenging for the worker (Illeris, 2006, p. 20).

For some individuals, poor literacy skills remained a barrier to further personal development long after leaving school. In Denmark, a study on vocational adult education and learners with a low level of literacy shows that, among teachers at AMU centres, the impression is that low-skilled workers with low levels of literacy avoid attending courses in order not to reveal their incompetence in literacy (EPOS, 2008, p. 8). Similarly, lack of success in

childhood education could be given as a reason for not attending general adult education courses. There is a challenge for policy and practice here: adult basic skills provision can be successful for those who enrol, but others who could benefit are reluctant to enrol or even acknowledge that they need such support.

Several workers in the French sample repeated a year of their study (*redoublement*) to boost their school performance. More pupils repeat in France than in the other countries in our sample: for many years, about 50% of those who had successfully completed compulsory schooling had repeated a year. Repeating a year is entrenched in the French system but the rate has dropped and stabilised at around 20% since 2000 ([4]). Statistical comparison of the Eurydice data (in European Commission and EACEA, 2011) shows that repeating a year is helpful at secondary level but unhelpful in early years (primary school). Six interviewees had experience of repeating a year at school.

Special education provision could be provided for those with learning disabilities, emotional or behavioural disorders, autism, and speech and language disorders. Health impairments, physical disabilities, hearing loss, blindness and low vision, and traumatic brain injuries could also provide particular challenges for learning and development. While coverage of such issues were outside the scope of this report, it was striking that a number of respondents recounted narratives in which health problems interrupted their learning careers in formal education and training. Illness, accident or maternity can lead to failure to complete learning activities.

Where poor academic performance at school was caused by lack of effort, remediation due to better self-regulation was possible. Of interest was the fact that although many respondents recounted reasons for their lack of success in initial education, some acknowledged that they did not put sufficient effort into their school work. One interviewee from Poland commented that she was ‘too lazy’ at school, while another from the Czech Republic recounted how he ‘could not concentrate on one thing for too long.’ A French interviewee highlighted how ‘school was alright but I wasn't very diligent … I was a bit head in the clouds, looking out of the window.’ Other interviewees from most of the countries of the study recounted similar stories of how they just did not like school or studying, skipped classes and did not complete their homework. In one case, a French interviewee pinpointed precisely where the problems lay: ‘I didn't listen much, that's why I didn't learn a lot at school.’ In such cases individuals may be able to

([4]) European Commission and EACEA (2011) rehearse the arguments for and against grade retention as well as describing diverse practice across Europe.

summon the motivation to learn in other ways and/or in settings other than in formal education.

One French interviewee related the experience of having decided to work and improve school marks, but when this approach was not successful, this had a negative influence on motivation and led initially to a drop in self-esteem in relation to learning activities: 'I knew I wasn't very good at school and I kind of despaired – I made a lot of effort but I just couldn't do it.' On the other hand, this tenacity paid off in the long term, as eventually she recounted: 'I don't know how to explain it – why when I was young I just couldn't learn but how now I spend all my time learning and doing training.' Other interviewees highlighted how they worked hard to overcome initial low achievement, such as in a French context, retaking complete years in secondary school. Another interviewee from Germany pointed to the special support and hard work required to ameliorate the effects of learning difficulties: learning to read had been a huge challenge.

Duckworth and Seligman (2005) suggest that school performance largely depends on students' self-control or conscientiousness, concluding that 'a major reason for students falling short of their intellectual potential [is] their failure to exercise self-discipline' (p. 939). Similarly, Dwecket et al. (2011) conclude in a review of the evidence on academic mindsets that 'academic tenacity' has a strong influence on individual achievement in school. This suggests that problems with attendance and completion of school work may sometimes reflect lack of self-discipline which may carry over into subsequent education, training or employment settings.

For others, academic learning was a barrier or 'turn off' and there was a preference for on-the-job, practical learning. Where individuals engaged in subsequent formal learning, it was likely to be on vocational courses, such as hairdressing.

However, if problems with school are related more to environmental or related factors, there is greater likelihood that a change in environment can produce significant changes in attitudes and behaviour. There are also issues of human development, with considerable change during and after adolescence. Farrington et al. (2012) point to how the key issue for schools is to support the development of students' metacognitive and self-regulatory skills rather than trying to change attitudes to perseverance directly (p. 7) or waiting for students to grow up. Some of those who had performed poorly at school addressed this issue in their approach to learning in their subsequent education, training, employment or other contexts and had developed highly successful careers. In such cases their narratives highlighted how family or environmental problems had negatively affected their school careers and how they had subsequently

worked hard to overcome their poor start to their learning career. Once again, the challenge for policy and practice is to support those whose careers have not developed. Support to develop such individuals' metacognitive and self-regulatory skills may be a task for continuing education and training provision.

One subset of the German interviewees typically had poor results in school and low levels of achievement, but reasons tended mainly to be due to conflict, lacking self-control or change of environment, rather than intellectual ability.([5]) This group often experienced turning points later in life where they caught up with their learning, although to differing extents and degrees of success. Their values or motives seemed to be influenced by ideas of independence, power and honour.

This group interpreted their barriers to learning as follows:

(a) Ali (DE, 26): the family situation is very bad, his father beats his mother, he is one of seven children, and there is no money and no help from his parents in any school concern. He had bad experiences at school, and although he had some support of a psychologist and he realised that if he learns he is doing well, but the bad circumstances brought him to drugs, etc. In prison there were opportunities to learn and people motivated him: 'Yes, there was support, there was always support.' On leaving prison he had the motivation and aspiration of becoming successful: 'I enjoy it, when a colleague is on vacation and I can tell the others what to do.' Ali is able to reflect on his biography and he knows that for him the problem lay in his behaviour, not in his skills in learning, because he learned easily and he wants to become successful. He wears clothes appropriate for manager and says: 'I don't see my future in a standard position. I want to become a manager'. Now, he has a barrier in his department of the company: his boss. The boss realises Ali is clever and he can be his 'assistant' when he is not there and he doesn`t want to lose him, but Ali has a hunger: 'to learn and try to get an education as soon as he gets a fixed position in the company in the office.'

(b) Kim (DE, 35): 'I had very good teachers at the elementary school [...] and that was good, though no I had no support at home […] my mother never took care of me.'

(c) Kai (DE, 46): 'there were problems in the main school and I also had a hard time in the social environment, as it was then split by different communities, so. together, then there were a few difficulties […] the city I always longed

([5]) The barriers to learning for the German sample are presented in an integrated way in this section, rather than distributed throughout the different subsections of Section 4.1, barriers for learning.

and missed a lot […] I was a bit of a tranquil human being, I wasn't the silliest. No, actually, my academic performance in elementary school was not always so that you could say, yes, well he comes through or it's not so bad […] always so 3 (in Germany school marks rank from 1-6, 6 is bad, 1 is very good) in all subjects.'

(d) Andy (DE, 37): Andy's problem was concentration and giving the necessary attention. His interests are practical rather than cognitive and learning has to be functional for him, it has to be relevant and has to be 'enjoyable.'

(e) Bettina (DE 33): as one of 11children she did not get very much time from her parents to support her in school concerns. Bettina values herself as having been a shy child at school, but she had good marks and her parents got lots of positive feedback: 'Then I realised […] and this appeared to the teachers often as well, that I absorbed much knowledge very quickly, but that I have been bored very quickly as well.' At the 6/7 year marks became worse and she quit school without taking her examination at *Hauptschule*. Some years later she successfully completed an external examination at this level.

The barriers to learning can be difficult family circumstances or parents who do not know how to provide support. An early school start or change of location can also be disturbing and affect motivation or ability to learn. The messages from this group are that individual support in the early stages could have helped most of the interviewees. Parents play a crucial role, but their influence is one of many impacts.

A second subgroup of German interviewees had poor results in school, despite stability and support from family, mainly because of apparent low intellectual ability, which led to low achievement. They tended to have 'stable careers' at a relatively low level but found this situation more or less satisfactory. Often a contextual change (causing instability) meant that further learning was needed. Their values and motives seemed to reflect the need for stability, family, tranquillity, predictability and control.

This group interpreted their barriers to learning as follows:

(a) Andrea (DE, 36): fear of failure dominates in the story of Andrea. She is afraid to fail in exams and either fails or does not attend them. The accompanying experience of rejection or disappointment reinforces decline in motivation for learning within formal learning settings. This also prevented her from acquiring a driving licence because the theory exam was an insurmountable obstacle. Andrea started to avoid situations in which she needs to proof her learning results. Her stepfather organised an apprenticeship, but she never went to the exams because of her fear of

failure and had no confidence in her abilities as a learner. Nevertheless, she worked at the time of the interview as an office clerk in the company of her partner;

(b) Wiltrud (DE, 38): her family owns a bakery and expected her to work as a sales person in the bakery. This was clear and she is satisfied with this job situation today: 'always so, because my grandmother had the bakery with a shop […] it has always been and I always like to have contact with people [...] I always wanted to do this.' There is no possibility to develop professionally; she is the boss of the sales department. School did not mean much to her or her parents. After compulsory school: 'I started an apprenticeship […] but I worked there for only half a year, because [...] my mother died [...] and my sister got pregnant at that time and the friend then has said the child was not his [...] and [...] I said, ok, I take care of the child and my sister goes to work […] and then went on to housekeeping school. In principle, we have learned something for later life – you can cook, can you sew, you can do that, that was basically a home economics school [...] we have learned ... how to become a housewife.'

(c) Mandy (DE, 26): always had problems in school with scientific subjects like maths and later also with English. Her parents and friends tried to help her. Later she attended remedial lessons, but she got bored with these as she did not always understand the subject. After graduating from school she visited a vocational school for office and retail, afterwards she did an apprenticeship as an office clerk, where she had problems in school, too;

(d) Momo (DE, 34): went to school for about eight years. At the elementary school his parents moved from city to a village where he was not accepted as a second generation migrant. He had to sit in the back of the class and after some weeks had to change to a special school. At this school Momo says he did not learn anything. He left school after the eighth grade, with little ability to read or write. The widespread use of new media forced him to try to learn reading, because it became increasingly difficult to hide his deficit. His parents only found out about it when he was 33. Now he has started basic skills training at the evening school;

(e) for Larissa (DE, 31) there were no recognisable learning problems in elementary school until the third year, when it became obvious, that she had problems with mathematics. Larissa received tutoring support for many years. Major difficulties with maths persisted beyond school and apprenticeship as a hotel clerk. After losing her first job in a hotel she was unable to find new employment.

All the stories exemplify severe learning problems which precipitate difficult situations at school and create persistent negative learning experiences. In this situation support over extended periods would be required to develop individual learning strategies.

Poor learning outcomes can also be reinforced by external factors, such as failing training companies and company changes within an apprenticeship. The result in the example of Paul is fluctuating career patterns, but also wrong choices made when deciding on first VET training.

Paul (DE, 30) experienced education at vocational school as rewarding. He felt comfortable in class and viewed the teacher as a role model. For apprenticeship as a canal builder he needed to change companies three times, because they went bankrupt. Without a job or completed training he eventually started to work at Burger King and in a supermarket, filling shelves. His interest shifted towards child care but he failed to prepare himself as needed due to lack of information. So, he took on other low-skilled temporary jobs and still hopes to find a placement within a training programme for child-care workers.

This subgroup has a range of learning and/or financial problems. However, they have ended up in a situation where they know now what they want. Julia's (DE, 37) situation is different; she is still interested in learning, but she knows that when she retires she will not have enough money to live. so she is worried. The subgroup were successful in learning contexts earlier in life but encountered a range of problems, due to health, undiagnosed ADHD ([6]), examination anxiety, and bad luck with several career choices, such as companies going insolvent.

One Italian case highlights how serious life events can disrupt schooling. Mirko (IT, 26) had some positive external influences in elementary and lower-secondary school. Then his upper-secondary school transition was severely disrupted by the death of his father and the breaking up of his family. From that moment on, in his late adolescence, Mirko found it difficult to engage effectively with learning. He entered school-based hotel and catering training, but left with a vocational certificate after two years instead of obtaining the full qualification, requiring four years training. His subsequent working life has been a sequence of low-level jobs with very few opportunities for non-formal learning. At present he is unemployed and has no idea of how to get out of his difficult situation.

Another Italian case presents an illustration of a life in which learning plays no part. Omar (IT, 36 spent his first post-compulsory school years in a clerical residential institute in which he encountered many kinds of violence and injustice.

([6]) Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

After leaving this institute and having formally achieved a lower-secondary school title, he found a number of precarious jobs, all subject to extreme exploitation, none requiring any learning other than hands-on training for carrying out very simple tasks. Omar does not show any learning agency, and has no reflexive or self-design capabilities. He is dominated by a blind concern about his future and is very vulnerable, including on the health side. He is now unemployed, without any help and idea of what to do. Traumatic early learning experiences mean that learning is simply not in Omar's mind as a possible way forward.

Poor learning outcomes at school might prevent an adult from further engaging in education. The reasons for poor learning outcomes are many and so are the ways in which they can be overcome. Cause and result are not easily distinguished, as shown in this chapter.

4.1.2. Low self-esteem, (un)willingness to engage in continuing education

Several interviewees had low self-esteem when it came to returning to formal education, but the degree to which this low self-esteem carried over into other areas of their lives was very different. Some were very insecure in regard to their ability to study in a formal learning environment, while they were much more comfortable in relation to on-the-job training or learning related to hobbies. John (DK, 38) is an example of someone who was not interested in entering formal education or training but was very satisfied with on-the-job-training. Jeanette (DK, 33) was very insecure with the theoretical part of her recent studies (social and health care helper education) while she has felt both comfortable and increasingly confident with the practical component where she received a lot of positive feedback from her teacher.

There was a similar picture in other countries where negative school experiences led individuals to leave school as soon as possible and appeared to have scarring effects on attitudes to other forms of formal learning, which these individuals tried hard to avoid. In the Czech Republic one respondent (CZ, 35) highlighted how one teacher 'was extremely strict and aggressive and had no mercy with us. One had to know everything perfectly. Partly because of him, I decided not to continue with my studies in order to obtain the *maturita* (baccalaureate).' A couple of French interviewees also highlighted how negatively they experienced teachers and one Polish interviewee recounted how she felt: 'I think that if the teachers had shown that they cared, if they had motivated me to learn and not behaved like 'it doesn't matter if you're there or not […] I didn't feel ok at that school, perhaps because I had no support from the teachers.'

Jana (CZ, 32) engaged in a VET programme in clothes production and found it very satisfying not only because of the interesting content of the education, but also because she was able to achieve very good results. She loved the fact that it was centred on practical knowledge and enabled her to work directly in companies. The experience of success led to her decision to continue her studies and obtain the baccalaureate. However, there were too many general subjects in the baccalaureate programme and she had enormous difficulties, which finally resulted in her abandoning the programme and left a scar in her self-esteem. 'I enjoyed the VET school, because it was easy for me, I liked it, I didn't have to try at all. However, the baccalaureate programme was very difficult and very stressful for me. I tend to stress a lot and when I don't manage something, it destabilises me pretty quickly – like the case of mathematics. Sometimes I was even scared to go to school. I lost a lot of self-confidence during the baccalaureate programme; maybe I was too confident after the VET school.'

Being low-skilled can sometimes be perceived as a part of one's identity, although participants very rarely express it in direct or explicit ways and this identity is often diffuse and fuzzy. Fragments of the 'low-skilled identity' can be identified in statements like 'I am a practical person, theory is not for me' or even 'education is not for people like me'. However, the question is very complex, because this kind of self-image often has roots in the negative experience of initial education and is connected to the stereotypical view of education as a traditional school- and theory-focused process. The identity can sometimes be defined negatively as a way of differentiating oneself from people with a high level of qualification, such as Maroš (CZ, 25): 'People with university degrees are arrogant and think too much of themselves, just because of their diploma.' Rostislav (CZ, 37) comes from a working-class background and followed the same training path as his mother (crane operator), who also used to take him to work when he was a kid. His experience with initial education was positive, because it was focused on practical skills. He is currently unemployed and realises that his employment prospects are rather grim, partly because of the general recession in the industry but also because he sees himself as a practical person, with no ambition to improve his qualification level: 'I think I wouldn't like to work on what they call 'qualified' position […] sitting in the office the whole day is certainly not for me. I don't think I have the predisposition for this. It's not that I am afraid of it, and I think I could learn it, but it doesn't interest me at all'.

He is only thinking about engaging in non-formal adult learning (retraining) because he lost his job and because he thinks it could potentially help him find a new job. However, the labour office offered him retraining in accounting, which he

refused: ‘It was ridiculous. I don’t have the capacities for this. I think it is more for women, I was always more attracted to engineering’ .

Bernard (CZ, 35) is working in the automotive industry and after some positive experience of non-formal and informal learning in his professional and extra-professional activities; he sometimes regrets not continuing his studies to get a higher qualification. However, he has accepted the identity of the low-skilled worker and the relative comfort that comes from low-level responsibilities: ‘In big companies like ours there are possibilities to access a higher position […] I know it is not as easy and cool there as on my current position, there are a lot of responsibilities. Down here one doesn’t have to think about anything. They calculate everything, prepare the material and I just execute. But still, it would be interesting, but they always require a higher degree.’

Roberto (IT, 40) illustrates how the legacy of school is a fear of abstract representations and lengthy written texts. He came from a socioeconomic and cultural background in which education was not seen as a fundamental value; he never had real engagement in school. After lower-secondary school he enrolled in a vocational school, but he quickly quit without any particular regrets. Although not lacking elementary social and personal competences, and with a good attitude towards work, he lagged severely behind his peers in cognitive and cultural terms. In adulthood, after several very low-profile work experiences, he found a semi-stable job in a company running elevator maintenance services. But he failed an exam for an official qualification which could have been a fundamental step in being permanently hired. He failed because of a phobia for written texts and formulas. Despite this, he is able to use computers and other equipment. He shows some ability in learning non-formally in situations which do not require dealing with symbolic representations. He is currently able to work as an operator in an outbound call-centre, handling a number of marketing issues and being able to convince some (actually, very few) respondents with his calls. He lives in extremely poor conditions, his skills hardly being used in the call-centre. He has two children to raise, so is constantly looking around for any kind of handyman task to generate additional income.

For some, the combination of low self-esteem and health issues had had a negative impact on educational achievements and learning experiences. Jim (UK, 32) suffers from severe depression. He is currently employed as a receptionist with a union, a role he has had for around two years. He started the job on a temporary contract providing holiday cover. Prior to this, he had worked since leaving school in a variety of customer service, call centre and administrative roles, some of which had been gained through employment agencies. Jim had had a difficult childhood, moving schools several times when

his parents divorced. He left school after compulsory education. Thinking about his future is difficult as he suffers from clinical depression, which runs in his family. He recognises how debilitating his illness can be: 'One of the reasons was that I do suffer, on and off, from depression. Clinical depression runs in the family. That affected my choices for the future – you don't think about the future when you're suffering from depression. You think about the past.'

For Jim (UK, 32), depression has been a major barrier to learning. He feels that training and learning is a way to get a job. He is content in his role and sees no need to change. It is evident that thinking ahead and into the future is a challenge for Jim, as he is not confident that he could achieve his learning or career goals due to his poor health.

These cases illustrate how health-related issues can impact on, and can become a barrier to, learning. For those with depression, stress or a chronic illness, looking ahead can be complex, and learning, as a long-term activity or an activity for future gain, is not perceived as achievable; depression can be debilitating in terms of thinking about the future. Low self-esteem at school is problematic when it stems from a lack of care on the part of the teaching staff. However, for some people success in other areas of their lives provides the stimulus to higher self-esteem, while many post-compulsory institutions are having to rebuild some of their students' fragile learning identities, fractured at school. Cognitive and affective domains of learning are inter-dependent; to make progress in the cognitive realm affective concerns need to be addressed (Weare, 2010). Individuals have to believe that they can rebuild their learning identities. Believing they have fixed (and limited) capabilities, rather than a growth or developmental mindset, can be a significant factor in holding them back; this issue will be addressed in Section 4.2 on drivers for learning.

For some older respondents, age was starting to become an attitudinal barrier affecting their self-confidence about the possibility of returning to learning. For Timothy (UK, 40) the thought of learning at his age was uncomfortable: 'It's been over 20years since I did anything like that and I'm not going to start now. It stresses me. I can't do it. I just come out in a cold sweat […] I haven't done a lot of it for so many years; I'd find it too hard. I have to work, work, work.'

However, others believed that while learning may be easier at a younger age, age was not seen as a barrier: 'Age isn't always a barrier; it helps to learn at a younger age, but you can still train to do a job at 40 and do 25 years of it' (UK, 32).

Findings on individuals' self-esteem and their sense of personal agency seemed to act as a warning against treating those with low formal school achievements as an undifferentiated group. Low self-esteem in the form of

misperception of one's abilities can be caused by a person viewed as an authority. It can also relate to health reasons or even be 'class-based'.

4.1.3. Differing narratives on lack of engagement at school

Lack of engagement with schooling for several interviewees extended to frequent non-attendance. One UK interviewee explained: 'I didn't like school at all. I was always skiving and that. We went to derelict houses to keep out of the way of coppers [policemen] half a dozen times a month. We played football and that […].' In other cases, pupils did not complete homework and many reported that they just did not want to be there and did the bare minimum. There were also many cases where the lack of engagement with learning was not challenged by teachers, who in some cases appeared equally disinterested. Another UK interviewee explained the benign neglect he experienced in a small primary school, where the teacher dealt with pupils from a number of age groups: 'Then we had a different teacher come along and she was shocking. Really shocking. I didn't learn anything. Just let us play football, kick a ball around. She was awful, dreadful, dreadful. She wasn't disciplining you – just let you do what you wanted to do.'

Danish interviewees reported how negative experiences in compulsory school prompt subsequent lack of engagement. About half of the interviewees had had negative schooling experiences, resulting in various barriers to (return to) learning in formal settings. Such experiences could be related to (specific) teachers, school activities or the school environment, but family or other external issues could also lead to withdrawal, with several Danish interviewees citing how divorce, alcohol abuse or frequent changes of school had a negative effect on their engagement. Lack of interest from parents, unfair comparisons with siblings or odd decisions, such as letting a child learn through staying at home and playing with a grandparent, could mean school was just not viewed as important at the time.

Lack of engagement could be reinforced by lack of support, sometimes due to unwillingness to ask for help with school work/assignments from teachers and/or parents. This could be due to shyness or insecurities in relation to their own capabilities, resulting in boredom or/and loss of interest. The overall result was often reciprocated with lack of interest or negative attention from teachers in school and sometimes at home from parents.

Individuals tend to engage in activities in which they feel confident in their ability to complete and to avoid those in which they lack such confidence (Bandura, 1986). School experience can lead to positive or negative cycles; in the latter case the challenge is to break the negative link. There were two distinct

groups: those for whom their lack of engagement with schooling was generalised to a suspicion or active dislike of other forms of formal education and training and those who disliked school in particular but were willing to engage in other (often more practical) types of formal education and training later in life.

Henrik (DK, 38) was bored because he did not feel sufficiently stimulated and intellectually challenged. This lack of intellectual challenge is an issue Henrik often returns to while talking about the formal learning environments he has subsequently experienced (also in relation to adult vocational courses (AMU)). The result of these experiences is that Henrik is not very interested in educating himself further with regards to making a career for himself. He is of the opinion that he works to make a living and that his career is not of particular interest. He has hobbies after work. However, he cannot imagine staying in the field of child care forever, and in that case he may have to educate himself further.

John (DK, 38) speaks of himself as a non-academic student who had a hard time sitting still. He was expelled from school a number of times. He eventually managed to finish and soon after finishing 10th grade he quickly found himself an unskilled job in a machine factory. This involved on-the-job training from his colleagues which is a method of learning that suits John well. He likes to work and to earn his own money. He describes it as a process of maturing.

The emphasis on maturation was emphasised by a number of other interviewees, who reflected that their attitude towards school and their lack of engagement was not something they were proud of and that they encourage their own children to work hard at school. One Polish interviewee responded to the question: ‘Are you afraid that one day your children will tell you that if you dropped out of school, they needn’t learn either?’ with the clear response: ‘But we always sit down with children to talk about it. If you don’t learn, you won’t find a job.’

Another Polish interviewee makes it clear that it is necessary for their children to learn from their mistakes rather than repeat them: ‘That’s why I keep telling the kids that they must learn, and I wish I had gone and learned. I finished elementary school first and then trade school for mechanics, but it’s not enough, it’s simply not enough. I should have studied further, gone to technical secondary school.’ A Czech respondent is even clearer: ‘I reproach my parents that they didn’t have greater expectations of me.’ While another Czech respondent (CZ, 38) also lacked support from his parents, who are themselves relatively lowly qualified and never required him to work hard: ‘Also, my parents never motivated me and never tried to force me.’

It is interesting that while schools and teachers were held responsible for the lack of engagement in some narratives, others pointed to problems at home and

in the family as a more fundamental cause of their problems. One Czech interview is expansive on this theme: ‘I didn’t have any support from my parents, so I understand how difficult it can be for some kids at school, if the home environment is unstable or unsupportive. It is not their fault; it’s the parents’ fault. If the kids don’t have stable ground below them, you can’t expect them to have good results at school. So I try to give my kids a good grounding and support them, because I know how incredibly difficult this time was for me.’

In some cases schooling was perceived as being boring because of lack of variety in the range of activities undertaken. Lack of physical activity was cited by five of the French interviewees, who explained their difficulties sitting still and concentrating. Asked about their good and bad memories of school, bad memories were, among other things, related to the necessity of keeping still for hours.

Lack of engagement could also be values-driven, where school education was seen to be of limited value, where it was not considered meaningful to their future lives. Interviewees could see a disjunction between school and real life. A US National Research Council study highlighted how positive engagement and self-efficacy in school learning was contingent upon creating ‘a set of circumstances in which students take pleasure in learning and come to believe that the information and skills they are being asked to learn are important and meaningful for them and worth their effort, and that they can reasonably expect to be able to learn the material’ (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 14).

Problems where the need for learning did not appear to be relevant could be exacerbated if respondents had difficulties in finding motivation for learning without an immediate, concrete aim. One of the French participants highlighted how if she ‘can’t see an application for her learning, it seems that it poses an insurmountable block’. Success in learning by doing after leaving school could make it seem that other forms of education were not necessary: ‘I did manual work since I’m a little boy, I am accurate, perfectionist, and it’s true that for me, it was easy. In my professional life, all my employers recognised the quality of my work and they appreciated me. I am rather pleased by my career, I know as much as somebody who is 60 years old.’ This participant expressed what others said in their own words: they succeeded in working situations and concluded that formal learning is not necessary because informal learning gave satisfactory results.

The lack of engagement with schooling could be linked to the child lacking a sense of belonging, which itself could be related to problems in the family. In the Danish sample about 50% experienced a divorce between their parents. Only

one of the divorce cases in the sample included strong hostility between the parents and the father developing alcohol abuse (John, DK, 38). Toke (DK, 40) also grew up in a split home with an alcoholic father. In his case, he makes the connection between growing up with his father and moving from town to town and his problems at school: 'I think it was due to a social […] that I was socially challenged. I had problems adapting […] to connect with the other [pupils]. I have changed school a lot. I can't really say that this is where I come from because I lived with my father. I think that while I lived with him […] from the age of 4 to 11, we lived 20 different places in Jutland. I have no roots. […] I think I had it difficult […] my social situation was difficult. And I think that it influenced my ability to go to school.'

Another reason for the lack of engagement with schooling could be linked to the absence of family support for learning. Some French participants believed their parents gave the impression that the important thing was to work hard in your job and throughout their childhood the impression was given that learning is abstract and does not play a role in further life. Parents more or less consciously conveyed the idea that they belonged to a worker's family with values of hard work and physical activity, while learning was passive and 'not for them'; this meant a negative view of school learning was present in the family culture. Other participants had family experience with parents who told them that learning for school was important but did not monitor school work because they were not able to or because they did not regard it as important. Parental behaviour and interest was not in line with the views they expressed about the importance of school learning.

Lack of engagement at school could also lead to an attitudinal effect, where the low-skilled perceived subsequent learning opportunities in stereotyped ways. The first is where the traditional perception of education as initial labour market preparation irreversibly determines one's professional orientation. This view can sometimes act as dispositional/attitudinal barrier towards engaging in education, in that further education cannot change their professional orientation (CZ, 39).

A stereotype sometimes leads to equating adult learning with formal adult education. Interviewees' first reaction to talking about learning and education was often connected to formal learning. This caused negative reaction, because education was associated with traditional school- and a theory-based model. Only later in the interview (often after being specifically asked about it) do they mention adult non-formal learning. This seems to be the case independent of whether the person has experience with adult non-formal learning or not. It is probably connected to the fact that non-formal education (in almost all cases experienced as retraining courses financed by a labour office) is generally

perceived as having less value than formal education, perhaps to the point of not being considered as an educational activity at all.

Gabriele (IT, 34) quit school after the lower-secondary stage even though he had been doing well in terms of academic performance, due to a feeling a sense of uneasiness (for very personal reasons). Afterwards he tried a vocational school for one year, but quit there and wanted to close the file on his education. He had problems with his family, but he felt compelled to leave home and support himself in several different low-profile jobs in very different areas (gardening, upholstering, and many others). For the last six years he has been working as a computing assistant (dealing with printers, connections) with a small company subcontracting to a bank agency. He now has to be careful about keeping this job, in which he sees a future for himself: currently, he is directly contacted by the bank as a temporary employee and has received promises for stabilisation. To reinforce his position, he undertook a course in accountancy in evening school. He is still finding his way but he is now an adult, holding a fragile but plausible life project, reflecting underlying abilities which were much higher than those signalled by leaving school so prematurely.

4.1.4. Opportunity structures

As well as the many different meanings attributed to a failure to engage at school, individual agency could be constrained by structural factors, such as the example of someone changing schools 20 times during their school career. Barriers to learning may also include lack of opportunity to learn resulting from a limited number of courses at college, funding issues, access to transport or the location of a particular educational institution. Some rural locations offered limited learning and employment opportunities. Small communities meant that young people left school and went to work in family businesses where learning was on-the-job.

It seems that structural issues, such as availability of apprenticeships, play a huge role In Denmark. Many unskilled people who have completed introductory courses at technical schools found that they were not able to complete their vocational education due to the lack of apprenticeships. Ellinor (DK, 28) is an example of this situation. After 10th grade, she continued directly onto the hairdresser's foundation course at a technical college. She completed the foundation course but was unable to find an apprenticeship. When asked about giving up on her dream of becoming a hairdresser she answered: 'I think it was sad, but after 100 job applications I don't feel like going after this anymore. I was plodding up and down the streets of Copenhagen and other towns [to find an

apprenticeship]. And in the end, I didn't feel for it. If it has to be that tough, you lose heart.'

The role of learning, education and qualification in improving career employment prospects is often seen by the low-skilled as uncertain or non-existent. Sometimes this is due to the fact that a job is sufficiently comfortable and satisfactory, in other cases caused by the volatile labour market. Soňa (CZ, 32) is not convinced that engaging in education would improve her chances of finding a better job; she believes the opposite is often true in her region: 'There are many university graduates that are unemployed. When I went to the labour office the last time, it looked like there were more job openings for people with lower qualifications. So having a diploma doesn't automatically mean getting a job. You have to work for it.'

Financial barriers for participating in education also featured in some life stories. They were never mentioned as an isolated and direct obstacle preventing people from participating, but are often part of a more complex problem (such as lack of information about available training opportunities) and connected to the vital need to assure one's own financial security during a spell of unemployment. The priority is to find sustainable employment rather than to return to education.

Lack of money can also be a common structural barrier to entering adult education. Unskilled positions in Denmark often pay acceptable wages; so unskilled people can hold positions which allow for an acceptable lifestyle. If low or unskilled people choose to go back to school this will generally mean a cut in monthly income which some cannot manage due family expenses so it is difficult to invest in the required learning time. There is also a structural issue in companies being reluctant to release staff to attend courses because of the difficulty in finding replacement cover for the work. This, together with the lack of financial compensation and time constraints, are regarded as the dominant barriers to the low-skilled engaging in formal learning programmes (Trepartsudvalget, 2006, p. 355 et seq.). Low-educated workers are in a more vulnerable situation: workplace conditions and the unpredictability (the threat of layoff because of cyclical swings in economic conditions) mean that worries about staying employed are counterproductive in relation to developing a proactive learning identity and the formal right to education (Kondrup, 2012, p. 285). It is important to promote the perception among the low-skilled/low-educated that learning is useful in the sense that the knowledge and competences gained can be used in working life (Kondrup, 2012, p. 287) and may help protect their future employment prospects. Brian (UK, 33) has worked with a travelling fun fair for 10 years since being expelled from school at the age of 14. He admits that he misbehaved at school and regularly failed to attend. He

reflected on the need for some kind of support and a second chance: 'No one ever tried to persuade me to go back or keep me on a course. I don't expect folks to take my side […] There should be more opportunities for people of all ages to have a second opportunity to get on training courses.'

In his early teens, he was detained for being drunk and disorderly. He failed to attain any qualifications at school and achieved only a level 1 qualification in later life through a training programme mandated by the job centre. He was raised by his grandparents and lived in a small seaside town with limited employment opportunities. He has now returned from the fun fair and has experienced significant bouts of joblessness. Supported by the government's work programme, Brian has started his first full-time job, as a picker/packer in a warehouse for an online retail store. His lack of opportunities for work was believed to be the result of his rural location and poor transport links to the nearest city. His efforts to engage in learning seem to be hampered by his limited access to funding: 'I wanted to get on a training course, but didn't have anything in mind. Every time I asked they just said the government had pulled the funding or stopped […] I always wanted to do that [electrician course] since I was a kid but courses want GBP 2k up front which I haven't got.'

Brian represents an interesting case of someone who has disengaged from learning from an early age and wants a second chance at learning: 'I've got no qualifications. I wish I'd have stuck at my qualifications and everything. I'd be in a lot better job now if I had my qualifications. I never finished the courses at college, but if there had been someone I'd got on with at the College I'd have probably stuck it out the two years.'

His feelings of disengagement are amplified by his views on the lack of opportunities available to him in terms of courses that match his interests and the lack of funding opportunities to finance his participation. Brian was one of five interviewees who wished they could return to learning to 'do better'.

In Italy, Rosina (IT, 27) illustrates how career choices can be constrained by the opportunity structures within which decisions have to be made. She grew up in a village in southern Italy which had very few work opportunities for young people. She attended and completed the middle school cycle with a diligent approach. Then, despite full support from her family, she felt attracted by the idea of working and becoming independent as soon as possible. She did not want to go ahead with the upper-secondary school she had chosen (in accounting) and preferred to enrol in a two-year vocational school for beauticians. Her family did not interfere with this decision. She had brief work experience in her village but, due to the economic crisis, the shop owner could no longer employ her. Rosina was then faced with the classic dilemma of a young person with very limited

prospects in a rural setting: do I stay or do I go? She moved to Rome, finding hospitality with her relatives, where there were a much wider range of opportunities. Having relatives in Rome made this transition easier in many respects.

In the Czech Republic, as in Germany, the lack of appropriate formal qualifications can seem like a major barrier. The baccalaureate, as a universal pathway to higher qualification and as an exam focused on general knowledge, is often an insurmountable obstacle for interviewees. They often feel that the long time since their initial education would make it very difficult for them to return successfully to formal learning. Iva (CZ, 39) was motivated to return to formal education and increase her level of qualification by obtaining a baccalaureate. However, she soon abandoned the idea, partly because of situational barriers, but also because of the importance of general subjects in the baccalaureate exam and the her perceived knowledge gap: 'However, I soon realised, that today's secondary school is for kids, who just left school and still have all the general knowledge in their heads. But for me, the gap is huge. There are so many subjects that I have never seen and that are obvious for them. Today, it takes five years to prepare the baccalaureate via distance learning. I realised that if I wanted to do this, I would have to be one day a week at school, one day would be spent in preparations and home learning, and one day of trying to find all the necessary resources in order to be equal to those who were in initial education more recently.'

Opportunity structures associated with education, employment and training pathways may also act to limit what are feasible ways forward for the low-skilled. However, lack of support may act to limit individual aspirations. For a number of interviewees, the lack of support from significant others (such as family, careers advisors and teachers) and the negative influence of others (both family and social networks) were barriers to learning in that there was lack of support and motivation to learn in school or continue post-compulsory education.

For some interviewees, the pressure from family to maintain traditions and from peers to get a job and earn money played a considerable role in their lack of engagement with learning. Jiřina (CZ, 29) followed a VET programme that her father chose for her, which she deeply regrets now. After some years spent working in her field, she discovered a new talent and new passion in her life; nail shaping. This boosted her self-confidence and she now sees herself as 'having been educated by life', which has much more value than formal or non-formal education: 'I know a lot of people who went to the university, but they are completely useless in real life. First, they don't have any job; second, they know nothing about life. I had to take care of myself since I was 12 years old, I was

raised by myself, often on the street […] I'm not saying I'm overly intelligent, but I think I have more experience and life has taught me lots of things that can't be learned at school. When I compare myself with people around me, I think that I know more things than them […] many people go to the university in their thirties and forties, but they don't learn anything. They just think that they are better than the others. Nothing would motivate me to go back to school.'

Carl (UK, 31) left school with low grades and started in the motor vehicle trade as a motor mechanic, following the family tradition. He admits that his attitude to learning changed while at college. Earning money became the main reason for his decisions about learning and work: '[…] employment means doing what everybody else was doing […] I was 17 and it was the money. I thought I'm getting paid for this and I'm not getting anything going to college.'

Carl said that he enjoyed the status that an income afforded him with his family and friends, as he had independence. Timothy (UK, 40) also spoke about 'doing what others did'. For him, it was expected that he would go and work for his parents, which he did. Timothy was from a rural location and a high proportion of his peers left school at 16 years to work on family farms and businesses.

Sarah (UK, 37) left school early and returned in the summer to complete her examinations. She was predicted higher grades, but achieved grades C, five at grade D and one grade E. On reflection, she acknowledges that the attained grades did not reflect her intelligence and that her mother was disappointed. However, peer pressure to earn money influenced her choices to leave school early and find work: 'It depends which crowd you follow doesn't it. I just wanted to earn money.'

A narrative analysis of some life stories shows that cultural and socioeconomic aspects affect changing life-roles. This goes beyond the concept of situational barriers as traditionally understood. Situational barriers tend to become less relevant as soon as the external obstacles disappear (for example lack of child care options for women). However, it seems that family obligations are perceived by some women from our sample not as an external barrier, but as an internal obligation that stems from their role of mother: taking care of children is more important than personal development. We can assume that practical and organisational measures (such as providing affordable child care) would not automatically mean higher engagement in education for these women.

Jana (CZ, 32) has positive experience of initial and continuing education. She is motivated to engage in learning activities and aspires to be a stylist. However, being a single mother, current circumstances do not allow her to engage in education and she sees her role of mother as a priority over career aspirations: 'I regret not having a diploma that would allow me to move more into

fashion and stylist occupations, and I know I could probably get the necessary qualification, but I cannot leave my kids behind. […] My children are my priority, already I don't spend enough time with them, so it is difficult for me to think of taking even more activities, like training'.

Jana deeply identifies with her role of mother and, in her opinion, education and training is no longer for her: 'I think going back to school is mostly for young people who don't have families. They still have a chance they shouldn't miss. […] These things are not for me anymore.'

Iva (CZ, 39) is a trained cook, but she has never been happy with her career: she sees her professional life as a failure. She has three children and took a long parental leave after each of them. Today, she is at the end of her third maternity leave and has huge difficulties in reintegrating into the labour market: 'I am convinced that, in a couple, it is impossible for both spouses to pursue a career – who would then take care of the kids? So I made a choice to give up my career, in order to take care of the kids. I don't know if it's a good choice – maybe one day my kids will reproach me, maybe they will be disadvantaged in their lives, because their mother didn't have any careers. […] I feel like I am 'paying the price' for being a woman and having kids – it is very difficult for me to engage in any sort of training, because it would mean that I leave the kids at home alone […] and for a result that is very uncertain.'

Education and learning has been interrupted by pregnancy for other women. Ilona (PL, 29) interrupted her education, when she fell pregnant with her first child. She returned and tried to finish school, choosing a technical secondary, but as she fell pregnant again and was at risk of miscarrying, she quit. She is ashamed of having only primary education, stating: 'it's a disgrace to have it written in your papers, these two years, not even two, a year and a half, because later I was about to have [first child]. Then I started school again in [place], but then [second child] was on his way, so I dropped that too […] Less than a year and I quit […] My fault, if I'd wanted to, I'd have continued. Because girls at my age had children and then kept up with school. But their mums helped them, and there was nobody to help me.'

Opportunities available can be constrained by parenthood, and one male interviewee, Rudolf (CZ, 39) spoke of his girlfriend getting pregnant as being a good reason for him to abandon his studies to find employment. He admitted that he had not been motivated at school.

The impact of caring responsibilities on their learning trajectories was particularly acute for single mothers. Hania (PL, 37) stated that she often thought of going back to school, but was not ready to do so and lacked the time due to work and raising three children: 'Now I simply have no time for that, but I may still

go back, not now though, when the girls are bigger. I want to, my children are too absorbing now, I raise them all by myself. And my work, too, in the evening I have no strength left, and I keep forgetting, somehow, about it. And I have so many books to read. I keep promising myself that when they finally go to bed, I'll pick up a book and read […] to enrol at school would now take so much time, and I want it very much, but have no time. I am alone with my kids.'

Parental support could be an important factor in the type of opportunities pursued earlier in their careers. Children with divorced parents talked about how one parent was encouraging while the other was more 'relaxed'. Lack of parental support was defined as those uninterested in learning and what school could offer, with little regard for school learning but favouring on-the-job and vocational learning. There was a belief that they had been successful in life and school and qualifications had not played a part.

Holly (UK, 28) left school after year 11. She had not had a good school experience; she was not interested in learning and neither excelled nor was problematic. Her mum had attained no qualifications, but she had progressed well in her job, promoting Holly's mindset that: 'you didn't need a qualification to get a good job, just determination, so I never thought I needed to get A's.'

The additional motivator for Holly leaving school and getting a job was to leave home, as she had a poor relationship with her mum. She wanted to live with her boyfriend. Holly also felt that none of her teachers had been encouraging as she was just average, but she did reflect on her apathy to learning: 'At school, in my opinion, if you were either naughty or a top achiever you got the input, if you were middle of the road you were left to it […] I tried my hardest at school, but was bobbing along under the radar, no behaviour or attendance problems, but I didn't want to learn.'

Holly has, however, been successful in her working life and progressed in many of the positions she accepted. In other cases, the lack of support or inadequate career advice had more problematic outcomes. When Ellinor (DK, 28) dropped out of her chosen career path as a hairdresser because of her failure to secure one of the very scarce apprenticeships, she did not receive any guidance. Shortly afterwards, her mother insisted that she 'pull herself together' and enter another youth education programme, for example to become a waiter or embark on clerical training. Ellinor entered a commercial training programme and completed the foundation course, which lasted two years. Afterwards, she could not picture herself working in an office, and she started work as an unskilled kindergarten teacher. Ellinor's post-school career is one of struggling on her own to find a suitable path without any formal career guidance support. Søren (DK, 28) tells a similar story. He started three different vocational programmes but

completed none because they turned out to be something other than what he had expected. Instead he started a job as an unskilled kindergarten teacher; now he finds it hard to move on from the unskilled position which he currently occupies.

Louise (UK, 30) had planned to continue with education post-compulsory schooling and had left school with three passes. She said that she concentrated on the subjects and teachers she liked. Although Louise had been keen to continue onto sixth form, she felt restricted by the school on course options and enrolled on a course that she had no interest in. The advice and support she received was not helpful: 'I didn't find it very supportive at school. You could go to the careers adviser lady in the library, but it was up to you to go and do it. They did careers advice and stuff like that, but I didn't have an idea of what I wanted to do so it wasn't much help really. As a child I needed someone to come to me.'

Louise returned to learning later in life, which, she said, was the result of a positive experience of counselling. Counselling had been prescribed together with medication to help resolve her long-term health issues. Learning at this point in her life had created a positive outlook.

In France, several participants explained that they were guided by teachers into professional training in which they were not interested, because of their school marks. Conditions are then not optimal for being motivated in learning. In France, teachers currently give career advice according to school marks, making career guidance in French schools into selection by school performance. Pupils with poor performance are sorted out and sent to professional training, while high-performing pupils continue their general school education. The problem is that many young people have no idea about the labour market and have no experience of working life. They often choose to attend a vocational class for reasons that do not match occupational rationale (such as choosing training which is geographically near to their parent's home or choosing the same training as a friend). Parents may also play a role in deficient career guidance. One participant said: 'my parents just knew their own job, they were unable to tell me what kind of job I could learn when I was 16'.

4.1.5. Summary

The way our sample was drawn meant that nearly all participants had poor formal learning outcomes at school and had spent some time in low-skilled work. They reflected on their experiences with formal schooling insofar as this produced barriers to learning at the time, and whether this influenced their (non-)participation in a range of continuing learning activities. It was noticeable that the interviewees provided a range of very different narratives about why the

outcomes of their formal schooling were poor and the consequences of this for their subsequent learning.

These barriers to learning at school could be separated into internal and external, which are interrelated Internal barriers are linked to individual characteristics, low educational aspirations, lack of interest, poor motivation, or competing interests, preferences or obligations. External barriers relate to lack of support from parents, teachers or peers; environmental characteristics associated with a particular school, culture and locality; and perceptions about one's future in the light of opportunity structures in a particular region or locality. Examples of external barriers include frequent school changes, lack of awareness about opportunities to learn, financial issues, access to transport or limited options for learning and employment in particular locations, as well as lack of career-guidance support.

Some individuals believed that they had strong skill sets which were not reflected in school performance. Their narratives could separate their school performance from the belief in their own abilities by pointing to external factors for their lack of interest or poor attendance at school, such as change of school, family problems, family obligations, preference for other activities, etc. They were subsequently able to build successful careers on their ability to perform well at work. Their success, though, might be dependent on favourable opportunity structures: for example, it was much easier for UK interviewees to be successful in some fields because of the lack of regulations about licences to practise. This group were, however, a minority.

Low achievement and poor learning outcomes at school will, for most people, have consequences on their future education, training and employment opportunities. Those with better school performance are able to access pathways rich in further learning opportunities. The barriers to continuing learning for those with low school achievements relate to the poorer range of opportunities available, often in combination with problems with their motivation and identity. Some interviewees considered poor motivation as a consequence of labelling, whereby it affected their self-image, self-efficacy and ability to cope with learning scarring. This was sometimes turned to their advantage in that they defined themselves as being practical and good at learning through experience. It was interesting to see that they could conjure a positive self-image which aided progression at work.

The importance of identity was also seen in those cases where individuals accepted that learning at school was difficult, so they worked harder than others both at school and work. A number of interviewees exhibited great tenacity in their commitment to learning, overcoming major developmental deficits and

learning challenges, as with Jack (UK, 28) who, in his own words, 'kept going.' Dweck et al. (2011) had concluded in their review of mindsets how 'academic tenacity' had a strong influence on individual achievement in school. Although the lesson learned from this is often how lack of self-discipline may carry forward into subsequent education, training or employment settings, it could be that we should also highlight how the positive effects could transfer to other settings. Where individuals exhibited 'learning tenacity' at school, even if this was not immediately evident from their school results, if they continued in this vein in other contexts it could eventually lead to better school results and labour market outcomes. One French interviewee sums this up: 'I knew I wasn't very good at school and I kind of despaired – I made a lot of effort but I just couldn't do it'; but eventually, 'I don't know how to explain it – why when I was young I just couldn't learn but how now I spend all my time learning and doing training.' Several interviewees are reflexive enough to identify that they had problems in this respect earlier in their life, especially when they simply did not put enough effort into their learning. Self-regulation was identified as a major barrier: where individuals have not addressed this weakness subsequently, developing metacognitive and self-regulatory skills (and reflexivity) may be a task for continuing education and training provision. There are also issues of human development, with attitudes, behaviour and even brain development still changing long after adolescence. Farrington et al. (2012) point to how it is important to support the development of students' metacognitive and self-regulatory skills rather than trying to change attitudes to perseverance directly or just waiting for their students to grow up

For several interviewees, engagement with post-compulsory education and training was accompanied by a significant change in their motivation and this was crucial to their effective engagement with post-compulsory learning opportunities. If problems with school had been related to the particular school environment or relations with peers or teachers, there is greater chance that a change in environment can produce significant changes in attitudes and behaviour. However, other individuals faced major attitudinal and/or structural barriers to participation in continuing education and training, and rebuilding their learner identities was a significant challenge. Their self-identification as 'illiterate' or a 'learning failure' could make them very wary of subsequent engagement with formal education and training. There is a challenge for policy and practice in that adult basic skills provision can be successful in working on low self-efficacy and learning scarring for those who enrol, but others who could benefit are reluctant to enrol or even acknowledge that they need such support.

4.2. Drivers for learning

The programme for the international assessment of adult competences (PIAAC) study (OECD, 2013) showed that people with a higher initial level of education are more likely to be motivated by the desire to improve their knowledge and skills; the low-skilled participate significantly more often out of obligation. It also highlighted the important correlation between motivation for self-improvement and participation in adult learning. For instance, people who are interested in developing their skills usually participate in some kind of training or learning activities. The PIAAC study identified the main reasons for adult participation in education and learning activity, including:

(a) do my job better and/or get better prospects in my career (42%);
(b) obligatory training (27%);
(c) improve my knowledge and skills in the field I am interested in (20%);
(d) increase my chances to find or change job/profession (5%);
(e) get a diploma or a certificate (2%);
(f) reduce the probability of losing my job (1%);
(g) start my own business (1%).

These drivers for learning were also evident in interviewee narratives. Tangible and immediate outcomes of education and learning are a major driver for learning for the interviewees in this research. Those with low educational aspirations seem to attribute more importance to this external factor, while people with higher educational aspirations seem to be motivated internally (feeling good, satisfaction) and regard their lack of higher qualification as a personal or social stigma, which leads to increased willingness to engage again in formal learning. Also, some interviewees with negative experiences of initial education were motivated by positive experience with continuing education or through an experience of mastery that led to the increase in self-efficacy. For the majority, learning was goal-oriented, whether undertaken as a necessity in the current labour market or for personal reasons to increase self-efficacy. Few interviewees engaged in learning out of interest, while others had no plans to engage in any education or learning programmes in the future.

Common drivers for learning were identified across the seven countries, including a range of personality traits, individual motivations, goal-oriented learning and/or significant others supporting and encouraging learning. These are explored next.

4.2.1. Driven to learn: high self-efficacy, resilience and proactivity

The belief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals (self-efficacy), adapt to stress and adversity (resilience) and anticipatory, change-oriented and self-initiated behaviour (proactivity) are competences that nurture the drive to learn. Illeris (2010) argues that motivation is a key factor in engaging the low-skilled in education. Personal incentive is based on self-efficacy, and the ability to motivate oneself or be motivated by people in a social or working life context. Motivation is rarely straightforwardly positive or negative, but seems to be a mixture of encouragement and barriers (Illeris, 2010, p. 15). Entering formal education is often a challenge to the identity of unskilled or low-skilled workers who have to find new life orientations. The development of a new identity simultaneously means discarding parts of the old (Illeris, 2010, p. 16). Self-efficacy, resilience and proactive traits were noted in several learning and working narratives, and were important drivers for learning. It was often about having the confidence to undertake learning and having a mindset or disposition for it. These individuals were driven to learn regardless of any positive or negative experiences of compulsory education they had experienced. However, it was also evident that individuals who were resilient and proactive in their learning were more likely to reflect on positive experiences of it, demonstrating self-efficacy, resilience and proactivity during their learning and work narratives.

Some learning and work narratives of the low-skilled show how experience of success and increased self-efficacy lead to higher willingness to participate in educational activities; they may even increase educational aspirations. The story of Michal (CZ, 38) shows how experience of success not connected to learning contributed to change of attitudes towards participating in education. This experience took different forms. Michal obtained a VET certificate in electrics. Due to his ADHD he had mediocre results at school and for a long part of his career he was even considering returning to formal or non-formal education. His attitudes to life changed dramatically after he overcame cancer. The first positive and successful experience with a short-term course increased his motivation to engage in education: 'If I managed to quit smoking, why shouldn't I be able to pass an IT certificate? […] And the moment I understood it was possible; I knew I would be passing more of them.'

Soňa (CZ, 32) had very clear educational aspirations from being young. She was a mediocre student attracted keen to emulate her father, who had his own restaurant. The positive experience of her initial education made her think about changing her mind: 'I was happy to go to school in the morning, I loved the subjects and teachers were cool. It all seemed so easy that I thought that perhaps I could go further (in my studies). If someone told me during my

elementary school years that I would go to the university, I wouldn't believe him. During vocation school I thought that perhaps it was not such a bad idea. The choice of the vocational path was very clear for me, I never thought of going for the academic path. It never occurred to me. I only thought about it later during my VET studies, because it seemed so easy.'

A driver for learning for Jeanette (DK, 33) was also a positive learning experience. After dropping out of two post-compulsory education courses and working 10 years as an unskilled store worker, she entered education as a social and health care helper; for the first time in her life, she succeeded and got good grades and assessments. She was very passionate when talking about it and explained that, at that point in life, she started believing in herself. She compared herself with (former) friends that chose the academic route and explains that she discovered that she learned more from being a trainee than from the schooling. She felt that she needed to learn about herself and to build self-confidence; she got that from acknowledgement and feedback from her supervisors and teachers at the social and health care helper education, and from the citizens in her care. Jeanette is an example of someone whom education has motivated to undertake further education. Her new education as a social and care worker has opened her eyes to the possibility of further educating herself: she talks about pursuing the three and a half years of vocational education as a kindergarten teacher once her children are a bit older.

Beth (DK, 33) is an example of someone inspired by the working lifestyle of her family to the point where this had become a driver for her learning and career decision-making styles. It seems evident that a major driver for learning for Beth is to be able to live up to the family tradition and be self-employed. Although Beth was expected to become part of the family business – or at least to work in some kind of office, as her whole family did – this was not her dream. She wanted to carry on the tradition of being self-employed and do well enough to have a comfortable life, as she was used to when she grew up. She associates self-employment with a successful working life. Early in life, Beth was conscious of her own competences and made active choices to support these: 'I was never academically sharp, but I have always known that too, so it was okay'. She did not enter the formal education system but paid her own way through a number of private course programmes/educations which has enabled her to set up her own business both as a makeup artist and as a yoga instructor. Making it for herself and becoming a successful business person seems to have always been an important goal for Beth, perhaps even more so because she chose a career path and a field of work that her family for many years neither understood nor supported.

Through these experiences of learning, interviewees found meaning with what they did and positive reinforcement. These findings compare well with the results from the Kondrup study (2012), which shows that positive orientation towards participation in various learning activities is a result of working life experiences. This includes participation in different kinds of learning activities and experience of using knowledge and qualifications at work; also, experiences with different types of knowledge and qualifications are important to possess a meaningful work life, as well as ensuring employability in the future. These experiences are essential for the subject's self-understanding, for work life and for work options (Kondrup, 2012).

For many, confidence in themselves and understanding of their abilities and preferences, which had developed over time, played an important role in driving their learning. Carl (UK, 31), Jason (UK, 25) and Jiřina (CZ, 29) spoke of doing what they enjoyed and were good at, so they loved learning. They spoke of improving their self-efficacy. Carl: 'I thought to myself at the time, oh aye, I think this is right up my street. It's not mechanics, but it's in the motor vehicle industry and that's where I wanted to be and to be honest as soon as I started I fell in love with it'. Jason: 'I didn't want to go on with this kind of work [electrical installation] afterwards because I kind of found it boring. When I went out on the building sites [for work experience and on the job training] they had about four or five breaks a day. Well, I'm not like that. I just keep on the go so it wasn't my kind of thing that way [...] I like learning, but not from books. I'd rather work it out to solve the problem. I think it's better going this way than that'.

Jiřina's (CZ, 29) positive experience with a short training in nail-shaping increased her willingness to participate in education to develop the newly discovered talent and pursue her career in this field: 'I've always liked nail-shaping, but after one of these training sessions they told me I was talented and proposed me some assistance if I ever wanted to open my own salon. So it really motivates me and I will do everything to make it happen.'

Toke (DK, 40) is a good example of an individual who is not only a proactive learner, but also one that is resilient. He has developed the ability to navigate and adapt to an unemployment system based on rigid rules and principles of activation. During his unemployment periods, Toke managed to have several activation periods in a historic theme park. He came prepared for the meetings and so managed to be activated once more in a scheme rather than alternative placements, which his case worker deemed more appropriate for moving Toke into paid work.

For others, negative experiences had made them more determined to achieve their goals and ambitions, or simply to succeed. Pam (UK, 34) left school

at the earliest possible age as she 'hated' it and could not wait to get out. To her, school just seemed irrelevant, but she left with five GCSEs ([7]) and the option of going to college. However, this was not for her and she wanted to do something creative and learn on the job: 'There was no way I was going to college. My parents really wanted me to go on to further education, but I refused. They wanted me to make something of myself and said I was wasting myself in hairdressing. But I knew I wouldn't be happy in college.'

Instead, Pam went to work in a hairdressing salon as an untrained assistant. She described herself as 'creative' and saw hairdressing as one job where she could use this ability. This was valuable experience, confirming her ambition. She found a college offering day release, so she could continue to learn on the job. Despite some negative work environments, Pam successfully completed her work-based course in half the normal time. Recognising a gap in the market, she was successful in securing a loan to open her own business and, even during the recession, she remained positive and upbeat: 'When the 2008 recession started, I almost welcomed it. I thought to myself: well, this is going to be a real test of my ability to steer my business through rough times. If I can survive this, I can survive anything. Obviously, we had to adapt – we had to get rid of people and change our business practices. We went through some really difficult times, but we came through. I thrive on that sort of challenge. Where others may feel downhearted and give up, I just get more and more determined to succeed.'

It is clear that Pam is a strategic careerist, as she has been determined and goal-oriented. However, in terms of her learning and working life she has demonstrated resilience overcoming limited support and negative environments to create a successful business.

4.2.2. Self-improvement

A second theme of drivers for learning was those motivated by self-improvement. For instance, learning was driven by the need to be competent, to perform a job well and gain new skills, and to improve social status; for others, learning was about being able to do more challenging work.

For some, self-improvement, a need to perform the job well and passion for the job were intertwined. Narratives from Poland and Italy illustrate appreciation for the role of formal learning and engagement with lifelong informal learning as a fundamental factor in vocational self-development and diligent performance in a job.

([7]) The general certificate of secondary education.

Frania (PL, 29) is married with two children and is currently running her own (unregistered) hairdressing business at home. She completed the basic hairdressing trade school but commented on the lack of practical training, which for her is an important element of learning. She is passionate about hairdressing and nursing, but undecided on which to pursue. She continues to be positive about adult learning: 'Perhaps a two-year or one-year upper secondary school, I've heard of them. And then perhaps some nursing school. I don't know if I manage that at my age, though I think that one is never too old to learn. If I made it, that'd be great. And in the meantime, I could still do the things I like [...] I keep learning all the time, I do things I like doing, but I'd like to train further, and I have my plans for it; I want to open a salon here at home when we've done the upper floor and I think I could do some courses or perhaps I'll go back to school [...] Some of my clients are my friends, too, and I admire many of them, because they keep learning although they have already finished school. When I talk to them, I feel I want to do that, too. But they are people who work, but have no families and so, of course, fewer duties, they have more time [...] Yes, I watch it, I learn, I buy DVDs with hairstyling presentations. And apart from that, I go to [place] to the hairdresser's there, to exchange experience and talk.'

Alessia's (IT, 34) main driver for learning is also passion for her activity, which she inherited from her grandfather who was also a hairdresser. Alessia had an opportunity to work as an assistant with employees who previously had professional experience in other countries and were very attentive to fashion trends and techniques. As soon as it was possible, she began to attend regular updating initiatives [short training courses of two to three days] located in Italy and abroad (especially in Holland) organised by a well-known hair-coloration house. She currently attends, on average, 10 to 12 training initiatives per year, in Rome, Amsterdam and other locations. During the second interview, Alessia reported that she won a special prize in Amsterdam, in a competition organised for Italian hairdressers. She attributed this success to her constant engagement in learning, improving her formal and non-formal knowledge: 'I learned a lot from my experiences. If you want to run this activity you have to be capable of doing a number of things and to be aware of many different problems. Of course, hairdressing as such is the core, but you also have to understand how to manage the business as a whole. You have to develop a very peculiar dexterity.'

Personal passion is the driver for both learning and working, which can be seen not as separated instances, but as two aspects of an inextricable continuum. Alessia defines this passion in the following terms: 'the satisfaction of creating, of being able to adapt an idea (the final result of the work) to a specific person, being respectful of the needs of such a person.'

Toke (DK, 40) is also an example of someone who seeks to combine personal interest and a career pathway. During his working life, Toke has engaged in learning activities, which he sees as relevant and interesting. He has an interest in medieval re-enactment and this drives his engagement with many different learning activities: 'If we have to talk about learning, I always engage in new tasks in order to learn something. And I have always done so. It started out as an interest, well, now I think this historical period is interesting and so I read a lot about it. To gain knowledge of how things are interrelated. Well, then I enter this interest group, where we can share ideas. I thought about the Medieval Group, because it was smithery, we went to different markets and started to forge some medieval things which we could sell at a medieval market. Well, one thing leads to another, and it's actually fun and there are some fun people to hang out with.'

These narratives provide examples of how learning for a particular interest can influence involvement in learning for work. For others, self-improvement was simply about attaining an educational objective. In a similar way that a higher level qualification is often seen as an insurmountable obstacle by interviewees, the perception of the educational objective being within reach can motivate some to engage in education. Michal (CZ, 38) had an opportunity to engage in brief training in his company to obtain a certificate and expand his level of expertise. Besides the direct impact on his salary, he was motivated by the perception of the certificate being within his reach: 'I knew that even if I fail, it wouldn't be all lost, because I could retry. I usually can't imagine things or concentrate on something that takes more than three months. This is why the two months training for the certification was ideal for me'.

Some workers regard their lack of qualification as a stigma. During their initial education they engaged in a higher-level educational programme and left early, often because of external circumstances. Later in their career they are confronted with external obstacles that are linked to having a low level of qualification (such as impossibility of continuing towards higher education, difficulty changing professional field), or with a feeling of regret or failure and are motivated to return to formal learning. In Poland and the Czech Republic, it was evident that, for a few, learning was an attempt to improve social status by picking up learning again. A lower level of qualification can be connected to lower social status and prestige, for instance, '[…] having a baccalaureate was a necessary base. I wouldn't like to be seen as having only a VET certificate or nothing at all' (Michaela, CZ, 26) or to feelings of inferiority 'I have friends who have university degrees and I have just a VET certificate and sometimes I feel bad and stupid' (Maroš, CZ, 25).

Giuseppe (IT, 28) is constantly oriented towards ultimate goals and universal truths. Formal education is not a meaningful issue for him. Although he does not mention any concrete obstacle to continuing school after compulsory education, he did not even consider high school when he was a teenager: formal education was not able to 'reach his heart'. He is the kind of person who needs 'emotional drivers' to make decisions and such drivers are largely inexplicable, even to him. The decision to go back to school was a sort of sudden enlightenment for him: 'I was working with another young man, who subsequently became a friend of mine (he is also attending this course for accountant). He said 'I would like to go back to school as a diploma is needed, nowadays'. And I said 'Yes, me too'. So we agreed. We searched through the Internet and found this school […]. This has happened suddenly […] this desire was already there, ripened inside ourselves […] and we took the decision. We did it. I hope that I'll be able to get this diploma and that it will be of some use.'

Paweł (PL, 29) and Ilona (PL, 29) are in a stable informal relationship with three children (aged one, eight and 13). Their oldest is from Ilona's first marriage. Both have complicated family histories and both did not live with their parents, but were raised by grandparents. For the last three months, Paweł has been unemployed and looked for a job. He lost his job because the company he worked for went bankrupt. Employed only for a fixed period, Pawel was one of the first workers to be laid off. For most of his life, he has had such jobs: temporary employment arranged by employment agencies in various companies and factories. On reflection, he sees how learning relates to the labour market: 'Nowadays, if you have no education, you have nothing, you're no good, not good enough for a shovel even. I was looking through job ads on the Internet the other day, and they wanted a person for cleaning, with secondary education and English, yes, languages are a basic thing. That's why I keep telling the kids that they must learn, and I wish I had gone on with learning […] I think I will have more work opportunities. Not only as a simple labourer in a warehouse or with a shovel, but in better positions, for example, a leader, a foreman, better qualified and better paid. Of course, there's also more responsibility in it because if you manage people, you have more duties, but your situation is better [...] I'd like to learn for myself, not for somebody else, but to feel better, it's what I want and dream about, and for the kids. I'd finish school, and then I could say: mum went to high school and passed her matriculation exam, and dad did, too, so do the same, follow us [...] To be respected, to be appreciated, praised [at work], without lobbying [sic], for doing your job.'

Ilona (speaks of her long-term plans, or rather her dreams: 'If I went on working where I am now, I could get promotion, be a leader, but for that you

need, among others, secondary education, and that's what I would like to achieve [...] and if not, I'll change the job, well, grand plans. [...] I would certainly like to manage people, I like it. And I think that if I went to secondary school and then further, I hope I still could achieve it.'

Ilona believes that completing school will be useful to her - not only in the sense of changing her formal position but also for self-development - and that learning is a value in its own right. Pawel and Ilona both plan to go back to education and enrol in secondary school for adults, but recognise that this may be difficult due to their current circumstance and living on one income. It is their aim to improve their educational attainment level and social status to improve the employment opportunities and prospects.

Giovanni (IT, 33) always felt the weight of disadvantage resulting from his status. Brought up in Rome, from early on he saw himself as a kind of divided person, partly belonging to his environment, partly rooted in a different sphere of aspirations. At the age of 30 he decided to go back to school and enrolled in an evening high school focused on accounting: 'I left school when I was 17, but I've always hated to be ignorant, I've always envied people who went to university and could speak differently. Studying, you become a wise and qualified person. My mother gave me this love for culture […] my brother, too […] when we watched difficult films, he would explain everything to me […] I've always had positive examples, I've always looked for people who could teach me something. I've always been attracted by beautiful, fine, intelligent women and told myself that, if one day I want to have such a woman, I need to become a better person myself.'

This idea of 'becoming a better person' is very important in Giovanni's narrative. For him, school and adult education are far from being only a means to reach purely material goals (such as a more stable or better paid job). On the contrary, he really believes in the possibility to expand his mind and in the value of culture per se: 'Many people here get a diploma because it could be useful. Instead, I came here for a personal redemption […] when somebody talked about the Second World War, I didn't know what to say. My mind was wasted. My problem is that I read very little, this is also a way to encourage myself to start reading more. I see that, since I've started coming to school, my mind has become much faster, it's reviving. […] After a day of work and study I come home rewarded, I am satisfied because I am learning.'

Alessandra's (IT, 27) driver for learning is mainly of a practical nature, although initially motivated by idealism. In her adolescence, facing unfavourable family conditions, she tried to gain personal autonomy and financial independence by taking on low-skilled jobs (waitress in coffee-shops). Frustrated

by these work experiences, she felt an urge to achieve more and tried to achieve higher education degrees. ‘One day I realised that I really didn’t want to work in a coffee-shop anymore... My dream has always been to become a kindergarten teacher: if I think about working with kids, I am happy […] I thought I should finish high school and get a diploma. It might help me to work as a secretary, instead of waitressing or similar. Then, if I can, I will go to university to study education, hoping to find the job I really want.’

So, she tried and enrolled in the accountancy school, but has stopped at the first step of this life project. The difficulties linked to her transfer to the city and the development of her emotional life pushed her into spending most of her time in the usual low-profile jobs, continuing her course by attending evening school.

Others also commented on their desire to improve self-esteem and alleviate a sense of shame arising from a poor education, but being less motivated or unable to do so due to current circumstances. Cinek (PL, 37) has worked in construction all of his life (legally and illegally) after completing basic construction trade school. Cinek is not very eager to learn and emphasises the importance of practical experience in life. However, his narrative clearly implies that external motivation and influence have prevailed throughout his life. When asked about further education, he spoke of his children being a motivator: ‘Perhaps when the kids grow up, when they’re big, they’ll motivate me, they’ll tease me that I never learned further, that I should have.’

Sylwia (PL, 35) is employed as a part-time cleaner due to family commitments. Sylwia’s narrative reveals her as a person who, fully aware of her situation sometimes tries against the odds, and even against herself, to achieve something, to avoid the life of many people in a similar position. In spite of school failures connected mainly with her problems with learning maths, Sylwia wanted to achieve something beyond primary education: ‘Nobody in my family, practically speaking, because I have a younger brother and an elder sister, but nobody went to any school, and only I wanted to step out a bit […] I finished trade school, literally […] because I knew I had to finish some school. I’m the only one that graduated from school.’

She confesses, however, that she is tired with her life and aspires to do more. Similarly, Soňa (CZ, 32) had high educational aspirations and wanted to continue after her VET to get the baccalaureate. She was not successful and abandoned the idea. The lack of a higher level of qualification has been troubling her ever since: ‘Not finishing my studies has been bothering me for years. Going back to school would give me a feeling that I didn’t give up, that I continue to work on myself. It would also help me find a different job. But most of all, I would have had the feeling that I’ve managed something […] I didn’t want to be

'average'. I can't really say why. Perhaps it was because of my parents, especially my mother, who only has elementary education. She couldn't go to school, because they were too poor. So, I wanted to prove to them, that their upbringing was good. It was a way to say 'thank you' to them […] I am not the kind of person who comes home from work and does nothing apart watching TV. I would certainly not go back to school just to get a diploma or a title. I would go there in order to prove something to myself and to learn something.'

Iva (CZ, 39) is also frustrated by what she perceives as a low level of qualification. Although she never had a very positive attitude towards education, she was a good student at VET school. However, she did not achieve the baccalaureate level because of external circumstances. Today, she feels stuck in the field (cooking) she works in because of her health problem, and the lack of higher qualification contributes to her feelings of a failed career: 'If I could go back I think I would try to pursue my education and get a higher qualification. It is frustrating to fill in the forms at a labour office and tick the lowest qualification box. I even showed it to my children in order to motivate them for school.'

For some others, it was evident self-improvement was driven by a need to undertake more challenging work and learn from it. This was very much linked to the affinity many low-skilled workers had with engaging with vocational work. For example, Isadora (DK, 32) is driven by a need to be challenged on a daily basis. When working, she likes being in a challenging and changing environment that allows for every work day to be different. This way she does not: '[…] get stuck in daily routines. Something must happen. You put 120% into the job as long as it is interesting. But if you work on a day-to-day routine, then I think your work effort just gets lower and lower. Because you don't have to do something extra.'

Although Isadora does not have formal qualifications, she achieved this challenging work through various long-term positions. On her first job as a manager in a variety store, Isadora says, she would have stayed in that job if it was not for the new manager that she did not get along with. She reflects on the variety of work the job entailed: '[…] because it was a really good job. Lots of change. New things happened all the time, lots of physical work, redesigning of the store because of new stock. It suited me fine because it had both challenge and security. Security as in 'this is the daily structure, but still there is a challenge in ordering the right products for the store'.

Later, when she opened her own company, she found herself being challenged by every new assignment. It is evident that while Isadora has found formal learning environments somewhat challenging to commit herself to, partly due to boredom, non-formal (and informal) workplace learning has suited her very well. Without formal qualifications she has managed to get many different

jobs, some for longer periods and some advancing to manager positions within a short time. In summary, although unskilled, Isadora has held several positions that would normally be considered to require a skilled, qualified person.

Six narratives from the French interviewees also referred to being active by learning and engaging with challenging work. For these interviewees, informal learning was linked with physical or even mental activity as a strong driver, while formal learning was invariably linked to feeling bored. One stated: 'I was never bored in the factory. There wasn't time to be bored! The more I saw, the more I knew, the more I learned.' Another explained that at school, in spite of his efforts to concentrate, he finished by looking out of the window and dreaming, while working permitted him to be physically active and to concentrate, remember new information and ask questions of his colleagues.

These narratives illustrate how even those with more neutral or positive attitudes towards and experiences of learning as an adult may still perceive their low formal educational achievements both as a cultural impediment and as a hindrance in acquiring an acceptable position in the labour market. These perceptions are generally accompanied by unclear and mixed feelings, linked to deeper reasons of personal and social unease. Many exhibit a lower self-efficacy and a lower capability in acquiring initial professional status. Their life projects and self-construction strategies are much more confused. The goodwill for increasing their learning agency is generally balanced by a poor personal infrastructure. Resilience is high, on average, but often mixed with expressed and unexpressed fears.

4.2.3. Labour market oriented learning: helping integrate and progress

Many individuals view the value of education through the tangible benefits it brings to salary, career development or labour market insertion. For some, education is a 'sacrifice' (in terms of effort, opportunity costs) and must have a 'pay-off'. Tangible and immediate outcomes are sometimes expressed as a precondition for engaging in learning activities, often based on a negative experience where adult education did not lead to desired outcomes.

Several Nordic studies have focused on low-skilled workers' aspirations for adult education and barriers for participation, with research showing that personal educational development is a dominant factor of participation in adult education (Trepartsudvalget, 2006; Rubenson et al., 1976). Development of competences related to working life is regarded as having great importance. For the low-skilled there must be a direct link to their job situation for them to engage in qualifying course opportunities (Trepartsudvalget, 2006). A wish to become better skilled at the job they already hold is a strong incentive to take responsibility for education

or upgrading of skills. Job security and/or the possibility of promotion are also identified as reasons for engaging in adult education (Trepartsudvalget, 2006).

A further driver for learning related to the labour market. The goal for learning was to improve employment prospects, stabilise and/or maintain position in the labour market or progress in it. Learning goals were expressed variously in terms of:

(a) the need to improve position in the labour market;
(b) the need to gain employment or change jobs;
(c) to keep up with requirements of the job;
(d) to improve employment prospects;
(e) to change careers;
(f) to gain financial stability and achieve a better salary;
(g) desire to gain professional identity.

For many, learning was driven by the need to improve prospects in the labour market. Alice (CZ, 33) had great difficulties finding her first job when she returned home from abroad, as the textile industry was in recession. She decided to give requalification a try: 'After six months of unemployment, I was desperate. I asked for training at the labour office and all they had was a PC skills training. But as I was out of school for one year, I thought it would be a good opportunity to refresh and update my knowledge and maybe find a better job afterwards. In any case, there was no risk in trying'.

The retraining course helped her find a job as a secretary. Today, she has a part-time job as a shop assistant and her first motivation is to find durable, full-time employment. Any training should, as priority, help her reach this objective: 'I would never go back to school, that's for sure. But I would go for training if I had a promise of employment. I would certainly try it […]. If I do training in commerce and selling skills, it would show the employer that I am motivated and perhaps he would propose me a better contract.'

Norberto (IT, 30) is an interesting case as his return to learning is not simply about improving his employment prospects, but is tied to his need to improve himself. He is a passionate character and his work has shown a clear-cut professional orientation since he was a child: 'Many children used to say that they wanted to become astronauts […] I used to say that I wanted to become a bus driver.' His learning agency is remarkable. He has chosen to enrol in the accountancy school not to improve his employment prospects, but with the wider intention of personal improvement. For him, formal learning is a form of the 'growing up' – in a broad sense – that he was unable to attain when younger. It could also mean more career opportunities within the transportation company, although mobility is not a high priority and he is quite satisfied with his job.

In Gabriele's (IT, 34) and Rosina's (IT, 27) narratives, career opportunities constitute the main driver towards formal learning. They are clear that they want to get a diploma in accountancy, and possibly to acquire some useful professional knowledge in this field.

Rosina follows a very linear sequence: concerns-projects-practices. She sees education positively, as a means to an end: to improve her life in terms of stability, economic conditions and serenity. At the time of the interview, she was living with a partner and saw marriage and family as a short-term perspective, to be coupled with a clear and stable professional project. In view of such goals, she takes her education very seriously: 'I put my best efforts into school. I am 27 years old and I can't waste time making mistakes. I try to think well about things and then go straight ahead.'

Rosina does not show real passion for any subject or field. Her driver for learning is a purely 'practical' and 'material' goal, while a higher level profession would probably require a more 'content-related' type of motivation. Also for Gabriele, the main driver towards formal learning is of a very practical nature, intrinsic in his work and life path. Five years ago he found his present job as temporary assistant. He slowly, but significantly, progressed over time. He became expert in tasks that are simple but very useful in every organisation (setting-up computers, handling the wire system, taking care of photocopiers). Those who are in contact with him in the bank – clerks and managers – spurred him into changing his status through getting a diploma, offering a chance for a better, more stable, contract with the bank. He decided to enrol in evening school and then to keep on studying. He is now close to the final exams. 'I found myself in a position in which I was enabled the engagement for attending an education path with a kind of serenity and flexibility. It was the job that gave me the strength for starting. I thought that this was an excellent chance [...] that in the end I would have had a diploma [...] Better later than never.'

Another relevant driver to improve his position in the labour market came from his personal life; he married and had a family. Colleagues advised him: 'They [the bank clerks and managers] said 'get a diploma' and I did listen [...] Otherwise, I said to myself 'you'll go backward' [...] This has been the real change in my life, in my attitude in regard to everything [...] The bank has been the positive experience that helped me in finding the way for standing up.'

A change of employment and the need to keep up with the requirements of the job is an important driver for learning. Bernard (CZ, 35) was trained as a carpenter but, after an unsuccessful experience as an entrepreneur in this field several years ago, he needed to find a new job. He moved to the automotive industry and it forced him to take up learning activities again to keep up with his

new job. This experience also made him more willing to participate in learning activities: 'Before, I couldn't imagine this professional field was so large and diverse […] one could learn one's whole life and still wouldn't know everything […] Although I knew something about materials from my studies, but very few things about metal, atoms, molecules and all these things, that was something completely different and new for me. So my colleague brought me some books and told me to read them all […] Once you get in a new professional field, you have to be able to keep up, to communicate with others, to show that you understand.'

Change of professional orientation can also be seen as a need to reintegrate with the labour market and increase the willingness of a person to engage in learning activities. Rudolf (CZ, 39) acquired significant experience in the construction industry but he encountered difficulties in finding a sustainable job in this field, due to the recession. He then considered retraining to change his professional orientation towards a more dynamic field: 'Requalification courses are certainly very interesting. I think it is a good thing if people can change occupations. Why should I stay in one sector forever? Even more so, now, with the economic crisis?'

Henrik (DK, 38) is in transition. He is currently enrolled in adult education to become a assistant social pedagogue, and his participation in an adult education programme has helped motivate him to achieve professional status and start a new career. Henrik has been working for seven years as an unskilled caretaker at a home for children with special needs. For a long time he saw his job as a way of making a living, and he had no intention of educating himself within that field of work. Last year, however, his manager encouraged Henrik to start education as an assistant care worker. He then had his prior learning validated and is now completing his two-year education in just 10 months. While studying, Henrik's attitude to learning seems to have changed, with new motivation for education apparently arising from the educational context in which Henrik has been able to undertake individual assignments in subjects of his own choice. In one of these assignments, he wrote about the San Fillipo syndrome and related it to his work with one of his pupils who suffers from this rare disease. In the assignment, he developed a 'product' that could improve the pupil's ability to communicate, an ability which is lost gradually. When Henrik talks about the assignment he is very engaged and shows an insight into this syndrome; because the assignment was closely related to his experience and practice, he saw the meaning of it: 'It was as though there was a circle I could complete on my own'. He received a top grade for the assignment, and it is evident that, just as suggested in the literature, positive learning experiences and the perception of

entering into learning processes that are meaningful to the individual's life and work situation are strong motivating factors for further engagement in learning.

For a few, learning was driven by the potential for financial reward. Martin (CZ, 35) has always used every opportunity to find a better paid job in his career. He left his professional field after a meeting with a personal financial advisor, having decided that management of personal finance would have a direct impact on his financial situation and that he could receive better pay by moving into this field. Today he works as a personal financial counsellor and sees the value of the education solely in terms of direct financial benefits to which it would potentially lead: 'I don't know any college or university that would give me anything useful, that would help me […] financially. The only added value for me would be the good feeling of knowing something, that's all. That's useless for me […] What's the use of having two university degrees and not having a job?'

The fundamental driver in Davide's (IT, 38) working life is satisfaction that comes from economic results: 'I am very materialistic. I believe that the only recognition of one's results at work is money. In my career, I've been mostly satisfied between 2009 and 2012, when we signed an agreement with my boss to set time standards for the production of pieces of furniture. If you were able to deliver faster than the set standards, you would get a bonus'.

Learning is secondary, deemed a practice-based process, driven by curiosity, spirit of observation, trial and error. A major role is played by his passion for the transformation of matter, which he perceives as an almost sacred event: 'It really struck me to see that from a piece of wood one can create a piece of furniture'. In no case learning could improve his situation, which he sees as mainly dependent upon his resilient nature and his willingness for working hard (even at weekends), much appreciated by his employers. His self-identity is largely based on a tough personal make-up of cognitive closeness with regard to his job, emotionally resilient self-control and management of others, and reliability in his relations with the company.

4.2.4. Significant other motivating the learner

Significant others, such as a family member, mentor, teacher or tutor, colleague, and others who have successfully engaged again in learning (who experienced a positive outcome in terms of career progression or labour market integration were found to play a significant role in the narratives of some individuals, driving and motivating them to return to learning. Alongside this, friendly and personalised learning environments and perceived attainability of training objectives were found to be important drivers for learning among the narratives of the low-skilled.

In some instances, this played a role in reducing the attitudinal barriers more than as positive motivational force.

The role of the teacher, mentor or an expert seems to be extremely important in some narratives. Personal contact can foster the willingness of a person to engage in learning through different mechanisms: taking away the social stress of group-based education or giving an attractive image of expertise and transferring the feeling of personal competence to the participants.

Jim (UK, 32) reports that his parents played a significant role in motivating him to learn. His father taught him that achievement is positive: 'If you don't achieve, then you're not happy. It's not about being in your comfort zone and never having to step out of it. It's about stepping out of the comfort zone and doing things you didn't think you could do. That's where happiness comes from.'

His mother, who encouraged him to try out new activities, corroborated this: 'So I'd say […] my mum's probably the person that's the person who does that [pushes him out of his comfort zone], encouraged me and says you can do that, try it and see how it goes.'

Karla's (CZ, 39) passion for her job can be traced back to the enthusiasm of one exceptional teacher at her (VET) school, though she could not finish the programme and obtain a formal qualification. For Karla a good teacher/mentor is the basic precondition for engaging in learning activities today: 'In first year there was this woman who only recited things from our textbook. It was clear she didn't know anything about this field and so we wouldn't learn anything [...] However, thanks to this new teacher I started to like this field and I like it until today. I felt like an expert and it was amazing [...]. To be honest, apart from the teacher of the […], the school didn't really teach me anything. I love my work, even if my choice of studies was mostly random. I have been passionate about it since the second year of my studies and the classes with the teacher of [...] I think a good and well-managed course could bring me a lot, but it's difficult to imagine concretely what. The most important factor is the lecturer, he must be helpful.'

The French narratives also showed an emotional process influencing learning progressions. This was generally viewed as either a positive relationship with a teacher or a process of identification with professionals intervening in formal or informal professional learning, seen as people with experience of 'real' working situations. Some interviewees stated that they had excellent memories of their learning period promoted by a good teacher. Good teachers were seen as professionals permitting participants to link theory and practice in giving concrete examples and answering their questions. They give examples of tutors of the 'old school', creating a positive atmosphere for learning in being both hard to please and friendly.

Jiřina (CZ, 29) participated in a master course in nail-shaping with a Russian champion in this field. It was extremely motivating for her and allowed her to learn a lot in a very short period of time: 'This training was something amazing. I learned great things just from watching him (the trainer) work for 20 minutes. And we continued for five days. If I should go to further training, I would rather choose 10 minutes with this trainer than any training that is obligatory by the regulation.'

Support came from unlikely sources for other interviewees. Louise (UK, 30) had had a lack of support from her parents during her school life, but when she was offered a managerial post after applying for a lower position she had gained in confidence: 'I love, love vintage and there was a shop round the corner. I was offered a manager position having applied for sales assistant. When I look back on it now, that was a turning point because someone thought I could do it. It was a lot of learning: I was constantly on Google and I talked to anyone I could. I had to know items were genuine and where each came from.'

For Susanne (DK, 29), support and confidence came from her manager. She is an example of someone who returned to education to ensure her position in the social care sector. On the recommendation of her manager, she started in the social and health care helper programme and took advantage of the possibility of having prior learning accredited. She saw this as a way to protect herself against recurrent cut-backs in the public sector. Despite successfully completing the programme, Susanne is reluctant to take the next step and enter the assistant programme (which opens the path to the nursing bachelor programme). She doubts her own abilities to take on the responsibilities and work tasks of an assistant which includes 'making injections and changing bandages'.

For Jack (UK, 28), who worked as a carer, it was receiving letters from residents expressing their gratitude which had boosted his confidence. His manager had also been a source of support encouraging him to become a trainer in the care home. Although nervous and unsure, he delivered the training and his self-efficacy had increased.

A positive example of others who have returned to learning, and who have experienced a positive outcome in terms of career progression or labour market integration, can play a key role in changing the learning attitudes of those adults still considering such a move. Seeing other people succeed through training can be a big motivator and can encourage others who may be hesitant about engaging in learning.

Michal's (CZ, 38) motivation to engage in education was inhibited by the fact that he was diagnosed ADHD during his school years. This led to his fear of failure and limited self-confidence about his ability for self-discipline and prevented him from participating in further educational activities. However, seeing

a colleague succeed in training was one of the main factors that led to his own engagement in adult education: 'At first, it seemed extremely complicated, but then I saw one of my colleagues who passed them, so I saw it was possible […] Seeing is believing – if someone just went around explaining to me how to undergo training, it wouldn't have been enough for me […] I didn't know what to do in order to get the certificate, where to find the training materials and it all seemed so difficult, that I gave up several times before passing it. But the moment I understood it was possible, I knew I would be passing more of them.'

For others a good teacher or tutor needed to be coupled with a friendly atmosphere in the learning environment. This combination was viewed as a key driver for learning. Alicja (PL, 35) reflected on her teacher and class environment:

'At the job centre, I took classes on how to seek a job, how to be motivated […]. And it was cool because we're sitting in a circle. There're no desks, a young lady ran it, I was pregnant but, never mind, I rushed there […]. Classes shouldn't be boring, not like there's a teacher who keeps talking and talking without a joke or anything like that [...]. So it shouldn't be boring, classes in the form of games, for example, for people to try harder. And atmosphere should be normal, just like we're talking now, and not some guys in suits who think that if they're teachers they're allowed whatever they wish; more laid back.'

It seems that for some interviewees with negative learning experiences, the traditional class-based approach is often a barrier to participating in educational activities. This is illustrated in the narrative of Martin (CZ, 35). Martin is interested in starting his own business and believes that some form of training would be useful for him to realise his entrepreneurial project. However, he hesitates to engage, because the traditional group-based education does not suit him. He is concerned about his social image and would be more comfortable with a one-to-one approach: 'I don't want to look like an idiot. I would need someone on the same level as me, whom I could consult. Being alone in an anonymous group would be useless for me, because I could not learn anything.'

4.2.5. Work-related and practical learning

Participation in post compulsory education and training is high in Demark and other Nordic countries compared to other European countries. In Denmark, non-skilled or low-skilled employees are generally less motivated to participate in education and less proactive with regard to the search for options. When low-skilled workers engage, it is most often in relatively short and practice-oriented courses which give them further or updated qualifications for the position they already hold (Trepartsudvalget, 2006). In the Czech Republic, the traditional perception of learning as an initial preparation for a lifelong career in a specific

professional field is still current, so participation of adults in formal learning is rather low. The reasons stated for participating in formal learning was around applying learning knowledge and skills in everyday life. Most (73.1%) of the reasons given for engaging in formal education were directly work-related (Čepelka et al., 2012).

The theme of practical and applicable learning outcomes of learning is a recurring one in the narratives analysed. Training methods in school and in CVET are very different. Interviewees who had a negative experience of initial education being too theoretical or disconnected from the reality of the labour market were sometimes positively surprised and motivated to do more training by the practical learning approach adopted in CVET courses. Juraj (CZ, 38) stated: 'If I would ever enter a training course, it would have to be done by someone who knows what he is talking about and show some practical examples'. Similarly for others: 'I think this training was more useful for me than the whole vocational school, because I learned things that I could use in my work' (CZ, 26). 'I mostly appreciated that my requalification course was connecting theory with practice. We could try out ourselves immediately everything we learned. So it was motivating and easier to understand […] I learned many things that I used later in my job.' (CZ, 33)

Bernard (CZ, 35) underwent short internal training in the automotive company he is working for. It positively surprised him in terms of practical outcomes and motivated him to work on his professional development: 'It was completely different from what I knew from school. They were very strict, you had to work hard and exams were very serious. You had to know your things, the teacher was extremely competent, he knew his field very well, but sometimes I had difficulties to follow him. Anyway, it was really done by professionals who knew their stuff, and I appreciated it very much. I was very satisfied. I learned lots of things that were later very useful for my work […]. It was very interesting to meet people from a completely different and a rather specialised area. I learned a lot of things and I was proud of it. I think this was the moment that made me change my attitude towards learning. I became much more curious.'

Many interviewees reflected on the need for learning to be relevant to what they were doing at work; learning on the job was found to motivate them and is often linked to the self-image of a practical person. Rudolf (CZ, 39) stated: 'I learn every day in my job, but it is very easy and enriching, because I see the immediate value of what I learn'.

A further example of internal training motivating an individual to learn at work is that of Michaela (CZ, 26) who works in a fast-food restaurant. She was very satisfied with internal training she underwent to access a higher position: 'These

courses are done by the people who know the operations very well, we treat all the practical things in deepest details. Participants understand everything and it makes you advance in your job. There is one testing day in real world settings, where you show your skills. So this is what an ideal course should look like.'

Success on the job, which sometimes occurs after a difficult school period without much success, seems also to be a powerful driver for workers to invest energy in learning. Learning on the job, getting immediate positive feed-back, is a source of great personal satisfaction and can motivate some workers to invest in their career, even though this idea did not occur to them during their school period. Non-formal learning seems to be easily accepted. One interviewee said: 'you can always pick up something at work which enriches you, really just by listening to your team leader'. Formal learning did not create the same motivation as explained by an interviewee who said that even at school it was much simpler for him to work when there was a result (for example in math or physics). Others worked with their parents or grandparents and had success in learning (such as book-keeping or farming) where school did not provide the same feeling of satisfaction.

Several participants expressed their conviction that real learning is done in 'real situations'. Learning is positive, but only with a strong link to concrete contents and results. Some of the interviewees had difficulties in reading and writing, which seemed to prompt research for visible feed-back in working situations. Roberto's (IT, 38) narrative differs in some way from the others. Over time, he has developed a certain level of reflexive capacities regarding his situation of family man (with two pre-adolescent children) having a very low income and highly precarious job. He developed significant drivers for learning by doing. He is even in favour of an abstract idea of attending a course, but when asked if he would be willing to study, he stated: 'No. I can do every job well, I can learn by observing, I'm willing to do it. But please no theory. That's my problem'. His drivers for experiential learning are mostly linked to a still robust personal infrastructure hinging on consistent social and emotional competences.

Another example is provided by Michele (IT, 41) for whom personal experience is a fundamental learning driver. Learning happens for him solely in real life contexts, from observation and imitation. Throughout his working life, he has learned by doing and has confidently played a variety of the occupational roles, including assistant chef, cashier, cook, commis, barman, gourmet, pizza-maker and janitor. Social and emotional competences are a key factor in Michele's life, since they are his way to access new work/learning opportunities: 'My work life has been a sequence of word-of-mouth [...] I've always been recommended to new employers by former colleagues or bosses. It also

depended on me: I'm good at understanding who deserves my trust, I am kind and sociable'.

Some of Michele's personal qualities (kindness, friendliness, openness, initiative, and communication skills) open doors to new learning opportunities; they are strong enough to compensate shortcomings deriving from lack of formal education.

4.2.6. Summary

Illeris (2010) argues that motivation is a key factor to engage the low-skilled in education and training, although motivation can be as much about overcoming barriers to learning for this group as it is about utilising appropriate drivers of learning. Going back to formal education settings can be a challenge to the identity of low-skilled workers. They may need to develop new life orientations as well as new learner identities. Self-efficacy, resilience and proactive traits were noted in a number of learning and working narratives, and were important drivers for learning. In these cases the confidence to undertake learning and having a mindset or disposition for learning could be vital, with such individuals driven to learn regardless of their experiences of compulsory schooling. Some learning and work narratives of the low-skilled showed how success and increased self-efficacy could lead to greater willingness to participate in educational activities and an increase in educational aspirations. The story of Michal (CZ, 38) showed how even success not connected to learning contributed to a change of attitudes towards participating in education.

For many, confidence in themselves and understanding of their abilities and preferences, which had developed over time, played an important role in driving their learning. For others, negative experiences had made them more determined to achieve their goals and ambitions, or simply to succeed. For some interviewees, desire for self-improvement, a need to perform the job well and a passion for the job were intertwined. Narratives of success in a variety of settings illustrate appreciation for the roles of formal learning and engagement with lifelong informal learning as fundamental in vocational self-development and diligent performance in a job. Some narratives provide examples of how learning for a particular interest can influence involvement in learning for work, while, for others, self-improvement was simply about attaining an educational objective.

Some individuals, however, although they commented on their general desire to improve self-esteem and alleviate the shame they felt in having a poor education record, were less motivated or unable to engage in learning due to their current circumstances. The barriers to learning were stronger than generalised recognition that it would be desirable to engage in learning to

improve their prospects. These narratives illustrate how, even those with more neutral or positive attitudes towards and experiences of learning as an adult, may still perceive their low formal educational achievements both as a cultural impediment and as a hindrance in acquiring an acceptable position in the labour market. These perceptions are often accompanied by unclear and mixed feelings, linked to deeper reasons of personal and social unease. Many exhibit lower self-efficacy and lower capability in acquiring at least initial occupational status. Their life projects and self-construction strategies are much more confused. The goodwill for increasing learning agency is generally balanced by poor personal makeup. Resilience is generally high, but is often mixed with expressed and unexpressed fears.

A further driver for learning is labour market outcomes. The goal is to improve employment prospects, stabilise and/or maintain one's position in the labour market, or progress in the labour market. Many low-skilled workers chose short certificate programmes. In countries such as Denmark and the UK, such practice-oriented courses provided updated qualifications for the current position (Trepartsudvalget, 2006).

4.3. Relationship between initial education and training and career development

The attitudes of the interviewees to their initial education and training have been covered in Sections 4.1 and 42 on barriers and drivers for learning. Here the focus is on how interviewees view their subsequent career development in the light of relatively weak formal qualifications arising from their initial education and training. There is also consideration of whether other aspects of their initial education were helpful for career development; for example, they may see themselves as having useful skills in areas other than the academic. A focus on practical skills was often connected to a negative perception of the formal education (too theoretical and/or disconnected from the needs of the labour market). The reality of the higher level of qualification often being a prerequisite for career progression in the labour market was perceived as a paradox by interviewees who saw qualifications as disconnected from skills. This perceived disconnect between qualifications and skills level can lead to negative attitudes towards formal education: bitterness, fatalism, regret, or categorical refusal to participate. It seems also that the link between qualifications and career was more salient for participants with higher educational aspirations than for participants with lower aspirations.

4.3.1. Experiences of initial education carrying over into later career

Three interviewees in the UK had very poor experiences of compulsory schooling. For some, school was difficult as they were not academically inclined and struggled with this form of learning. Poor experiences were also sometimes attributed to a single teacher who had been unsupportive or who had made a derogatory or critical comment. This could be carried forward in an unhelpful way. Sarah (UK, 37) still remembers negative comments from a teacher and the impact it had on her at the time and now: 'A teacher said 'You're never going to amount to much are you? Only a hairdresser'. It's now 20 years later and I can remember where he was standing, the look on his face and I felt as if he'd punched me in the gut.'

Seven interviewees had mixed experiences of schooling. They remarked on positive and negative experiences, but, for them, school had not encouraged them to enjoy learning or influenced participation in continuing learning post compulsory education. Pam (UK, 34) had mixed experience at school, but she remembers the one teacher who was helpful: 'Most of them [teachers] were like that. Not interested. But there was one teacher who really helped me. My maths teacher was brilliant. She taught me on my own, after school, because I was having terrible difficulty keeping up and understanding everything during the lesson. She worked so hard with me. When I look back, it was amazing what she did. I got a B in my GCSE maths. And that has really helped me with my business.'

Ellinor (DK, 28) is an example of an interviewee who wanted to rejoin the education system to improving the financial position of the family. She is applying for jobs as an adult clerical apprentice so that she and her husband Søren (DK, 28) can buy a house and have a more steady income. She is not only driving her own return to formal education, but also her husband's as she is encouraging him to take up an opening as a bicycle mechanic in a bicycle shop. Family support is a key element in this case.

Poor school performance resulted in the achievement of higher esteem becoming a goal among some interviewees. Jonas (DK, 26) is comparing himself to his friends who have completed higher education and feels defensive about 'still' working as an assistant pedagogue. He has applied for admission at the Journalist High School and at various universities for several years but has not been successful, partly due to the admission requirements of either maths or a second foreign language at A-level. When asked about his friends' attitudes in the follow-up interview, Jonas is not sure that his friends are prejudiced, or whether it is his own prejudice about still being a social pedagogue assistant.

Beth (DK, 33) sees education very differently from when she was at school. Learning is now seen as a way to improve her business activities in a way they did not foresee at school. Beth is doing a hairdresser's programme to widen her competences and aims to start her own business. She has identified a niche in the market targeting busy business executives who do not have the time to go to the hairdresser's and aims to set up a salon providing mobile services. However, when Beth was at school, she thought she would have no need for maths skills: 'I just couldn't see the point in learning because I knew that I wasn't going to need it! It's not going to happen. I don't need it, and I don't want to fill my brain with something I won't need anyway.'

Toke (DK, 40) is a very different case. Family problems following his parents' divorce meant he often changed schools and he just did not settle into a pattern of engagement with schooling. However, although his lack of school qualifications hampered his early career, and he experienced several spells of unemployment, there was no negativity towards the idea of learning but quite the reverse. Toke is driven by a broad interest/passion for crafts and is constantly learning – by doing, by studying, by learning from others - and wants to integrate this learning into his business concept. His recent passion for antique pistols has led him into the craft of the gunsmith and he is now assessing how this can become part of his business.

Experiences in initial education can lead in different directions later in life. Some individuals carry a 'learning scar', others perceive learning as a means to achieve something else (that is, partly a utilitarian conceptualisation of education which came out in a number of interviews), while others see learning as an adult is a different way of learning from school. For example, Toke (DK, 40) and Henrik (DK, 38) are driven by their interests/passions and do not necessarily believe their learning activities lea to 'something'. Henrik, in particular, is rather sceptical about his present engagement in the social pedagogue assistant programme and whether it will actually improve his situation in the labour market or make it worse. He does not think that the qualification will provide a higher status compared to unskilled social pedagogue assistants. He fears that it may make his job prospects worse, as a skilled assistant has to be paid more than an unskilled one: 'If the qualification does not lead to greater responsibility and added value to an institution, it may be of little value'.

Experiences of initial schooling, particularly in relation to attainment of formal qualifications, had an immediate effect for many participants confronted with barriers on the labour market that were connected to their lack of higher qualifications (such as inability to access high-skilled positions). Some interviewees, though, were able to establish themselves in the labour market

despite their lack of formal qualifications. Although a minority, there are enough such cases for a narrative to be established where experiences of formal education can be dismissed, with school qualifications - ‘pure formality’, ‘stupid piece of paper’ - with no connection to the level of skills of the person and how they perform in the real world. Such a narrative emphasises professional experience as opposed to the formal qualification. Karla (CZ, 39) works as a seller of spare parts in car retail and she considers herself lucky to have a job, given her low level of qualification. She is frustrated by the fact, that although she has years of experience in the field, it is impossible for her to change employer, because most of the companies require employees to have a baccalaureate: ‘I don’t think today’s kids are well prepared for the world of work. Their studies are too general and should be focused on concrete and useful outcomes. They obtain the *maturita* but in reality they don’t know anything, they aren’t ready for anything. […]Today people don’t look at how many years of experience you have, but whether you have the right paper or not. [...] I once asked a different company what it would take for them to hire someone like me. They appreciated my initial education and my experience… but most of the employers ask people to return to school and obtain the baccalaureate. Today, employers don't recognise your experience; they want you to have a baccalaureate.’

Martin (CZ, 35) is also dismissive of the role of formal education in skills development. After a long career in low-skilled positions, he was able to access a much better paid job (financial advisor) only after brief training. His own experience shows him that higher qualification is not necessarily linked to higher skills, but has only a formal value from the regulatory standpoint: ‘The only use of the baccalaureate is to advance in the salary grid, there is nothing else one gets from obtaining it. [...] I once had to teach an engineer how to read plans; this is how incapable he was: me, without any kind of school! And he has the engineering diploma.’

Rudolf (CZ, 39) is frustrated about his unsuccessful job seeking. During his experience he was able to demonstrate his skills to employers and this played a major role in his career progression. However, due to his lack of formal qualification, today he is unable to find a job other than as a temporary construction worker: ‘As soon as they found out that I could read a plan, they proposed me a post of a crew manager. Those were different times, today I often see job openings on the internet and they require a university diploma for this kind of positions […] regret not continuing my studies. I could have been somewhere else. If I had a university diploma, I wouldn’t have to be just a construction worker. I could have been construction site manager directly.’

Miroslava's (CZ, 27) motivation to return to formal learning and improve her qualification is not based on the desire to develop new knowledge or skills, but mostly because on importance on the labour market: 'I think that having a university degree is a must today, this is how the society perceives it today. On the other hand, the question is whether the people that come out of universities are usable on the labour market. I think it is mostly a formality that plays a decisive role in the process of finding a job. If an employer sees two candidates with similar experiences, he will choose the one with the university degree.'

Davide (IT, 38) does not seem able to imagine possible evolution or improvements in his position through further education, training or formal skills development. He conveys the message that, in the furniture-making sector, one can really learn only from 'pure' practical work: he has never seriously considered attending vocational training in his field. He reports that there was a school for furniture-makers in his area, but its reputation was not good, as it was believed to offer a lot of theory and no practical training: 'Our job is a practical one. Work for me was more of a school than school itself.'

4.3.2. Disconnection between initial education and training and labour market reality

Negative experience with initial education and difficulties in the transition from school to the labour market lead some interviewees to see their education as completely disconnected from the needs of the labour market. This sometimes results in the belief that engaging in some form of education makes no sense, because it does not lead to the development of skills that are useful on the labour market. Juraj's (CZ, 38) transition between school and work life was marked by a big difference between what he learned at school and the skills required by his workplace. This impacted his views about formal education. Currently, he sees no value in increasing his qualification level but attaches more value to informal learning and concrete experience: 'At school they taught us lots of different things and when I came to my first job, it was something completely different. What we learned was without any perspective, without any use. We used machines that were 40 years old and completely outdated' (CZ, 38).

Iva (CZ, 39) has a very negative opinion about formal education, based on her experience of initial education. She says she learned nothing and had to develop all the necessary skills during her first working experience: 'All we did during our internships was peeling potatoes, washing dishes and wiping the floor. Afterwards we wrote fictional things in our work diaries, in order to make it look like we were really cooking, preparing sophisticated dishes. It was very hypocritical, but I guess that because of the communists, everyone just kept quiet

and accepted the system. So when I left the VET school, I knew nothing about cooking. [...] Teachers were expecting everybody to read the norms themselves at home and learn them by heart, that was all.'

Alessandra (IT, 27), in spite of a difficult economic situation, tends to be optimistic. Her initial education did not equip her with the skills necessary to be successful in the labour market, but she seeks to remedy that through formal adult education. She believes that she has made the right choice enrolling in evening school but she sees it as a hard path: 'School now is my priority. I do everything based on the school hours, on what I have to study. Now I must finish, this is my priority. I must obtain this diploma. It's been three very hard years: they give us homework, there are tests, it's hard […] At the beginning it was so tough to start studying again and take up the fast pace.'

The expected outcomes of her education adventure, however, are different from those she had at the times of its inception. Her 'ideal I' has taken the form not of a kindergarten teacher but of a person engaged in a professional activity. She is very much influenced by someone who employs her as domestic help and baby-sitter. This is a lady who works for the UN: she does a job she likes, has a career and a nice family. Alessandra (IT, 27) sees her as a successful woman and identifies with her values. Of course she is perfectly aware that her own future prospects are not as favourable, but at least she has a reference point for her wishes of being somebody. This woman also encourages Alessandra to continue her studies. Another important point of reference is Alessandra's boyfriend, who really believes in her and has a similar story: he is working for a catering service in a hospital, but aims to become a nurse. Even if his first attempt to enter nursery school failed, he is going to try again.

Ginevra's (IT, 31) reflexivity style lies between the 'communicative' (dependent upon inner circles' views and advice) and 'fractured' (incapable of real decisions about projects and practices) styles. Due to her previous attempts and failures she cannot coherently foresee outcomes from participation in education and training, or comprehend the directions of her learning and career development. Achieving such a vision is hindered by her past unsatisfactory experiences in lower-secondary school and in VET. She does not believe that her life would improve if she went back to school. Rather, she considers it important to be gaining new practical skills. But such a bent towards the 'practical' has no significant correlation in terms of the personal infrastructure which typically supports effort in the practical aspects of work and life. She seems unable to face the inevitable difficulties of work relationships; she did not display resilience, quitting when she discovered that such relationships were not easy. Ginevra considered the owner of the shop where she quit working after just three months

unprofessional, and that he had not treated her with sufficient respect. She tends to blame society and politics for her failure: 'I would like to be a beautician, but here it's not possible to work […] politicians talk and talk, but don't do anything concrete to enable us, young people, to find jobs.' She tried to solve her identity problem by considering becoming a beautician, but the project was fragile and so it was the final way of life. Now she hopes to survive offering some beauty treatments for people she knows, in the neighbourhood. To date she has been unable to find someone interested in her services. Her weak social competences do not support her wishes in such a direction.

Giovanni (IT, 33) is another interviewee making use of adult education to try to remedy a weak labour market position arising from initial education and training. His vision of learning is conditioned by his background. This is so intense that he seems only partly able to accept that evening school for accountants is aimed at offering a certain level of cultural development, but the primary goal is of a professional nature. He does not show too much interest in the latter kind of educational outcomes. His work activities are mostly oriented towards the business area. He runs a beauty centre (which is going to be closed because of decreasing demand) and he is going to increase his role in the management of a local football team, hoping future returns will increase due to the greater activity (more supporters, audience, and advertising). However, as his situation has recently changed (he is now a father) he probably would be available to give up some freedom in exchange for a more stable job and a secure salary. But he also realises that it is nearly impossible for him to find a stable, well-paid job. Very likely he will not be really available for a routine job based on the implementation of the accounting disciplines. His opportunities are mostly linked to social competences, while his emotional instability is a cause for concern.

4.3.3. The role of career guidance (formal and informal)

In Denmark since the early 1990s, those under 30 had access to formal career guidance as it was part of the school curriculum and also part of activation policies targeted at those under 25. Since 2012, access to career guidance in activation policies has been available to those under 30 aimed at moving them quickly into education or employment. Experiences, though, are mixed and the narratives point to substantial gaps in this policy.

Søren (DK, 28) has positive experiences with career guidance in grade 9 where he 'made a plan for what our future could look like' in cooperation with a career counsellor. However, when we look at Søren's 'potential contact points' with support structures, he does not report on any helpful support when he

dropped out of a vocational foundational course, which in his case happened three times. After dropping out of the foundation course for data technician he started in a municipal youth centre. However, he stated that the experience was futile. 'I sent off 2 000 applications which never amounted to anything. And then […] well, then when I had the opportunity to get away from this system, I grabbed it immediately.'

To some degree, the centre qualifies as 'successful' as it moves Søren into the labour market motivated by something which seems to be irritation by the rigidity of the 'system'. However, in terms of offering Søren meaningful guidance and a process of realising his opportunities in the education system or labour market, it is less successful. Søren moved into an unsteady, unskilled position as pedagogue assistant; 10 years later, he is struggling to create a viable living for himself and his family.

Jonas (DK, 26) has similar experiences. He had positive experiences with career guidance in 10th grade but he has not since been in contact with a career counsellor despite having had several potential contact points when dropping out of the foundation course for graphic design and when entering a single-subject course to qualify for university. However, he has used his mother – or rather she has pushed him – in his career decision-making. The role of parents, especially mothers, in career decision-making is something which goes across the Danish sample (Ellinor, Søren, John, Isadora, Toke).

A positive narrative about career guidance is offered by Erik (DK, 35) who was offered coaching as part of the unemployment scheme. The coaching is on a one-to-one basis and Erik had three sessions with the coach. This individualised approach was successful in motivating Erik to undertake a 10th grade speed course, which he completes in three weeks. After the summer holidays, he was admitted to the higher preparatory education programme which is a two-year programme giving admission to the university. When describing the coaching session, Erik emphasises the coach's ability to listen and ask questions. The positive results of individualised support are in line with the recent report on the effects of the support by job centres (Danish Ministry of Employment, 2014).

Beatrice (DK, 34) had good experiences with recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedures, leading to her exemption from part of the social and health care helper programme.

Career guidance is generally unknown to many participants, particularly in Poland and the Czech Republic. In those countries where career guidance is known there are mixed feelings regarding the usefulness of it. When specifically asked whether they would appreciate any assistance or counselling about their future professional orientation, some replied in the affirmative but without

knowing exactly what such help should comprise and where it could be found. For instance, Karla (CZ, 39) has mixed feelings about career guidance. On the one hand she is very reluctant, because she fears the psychological evaluation, while on the other hand she could use the support and reassurance of a career counsellor in making a decision to engage in learning. However, she is uncertain whether such services are available: 'Why should I go to a counsellor, he would make me pass some tests and I would only get to know how stupid I am. I don't think finding appropriate information about training opportunities is a problem. The problem is taking the decision.'

Fabienne (FR, 40) is critical about her career guidance counsellor and seems to react negatively to every suggestion. She has been a cleaner for individual employers for many years and always worked as a necessity. She has tried to change her career, but has been unsuccessful. At present, she is not engaged in the guidance process and believes it will be difficult to get a job, even with a qualification.

Bernard (CZ, 35) has been thinking about engaging in formal education and he would appreciate an objective evaluation of his skills to assess realistically the possibility. However, he would prefer this to be without risk: 'I know it would be extremely difficult for me to go to the university. There are so many things I forgot and I would also need some assistance, some sort of tests that would determine whether I am able to do it or not. It could be interesting if I could go to the university for one year, just to test it, if I would manage it, it would be very good for my self-esteem and I could continue even further.'

In some cases, the notion of counselling was connected to the traditional test-based career counselling sometimes practised at school, which provoked a negative reaction. In another case, an objective evaluation of one's capacities was seen as potentially beneficial in setting realistic education aspirations.

Formal career guidance seemed more likely to be offered to those who became unemployed in countries with extensive public employment services provision, such as Denmark, Germany and the UK. In contrast, relatively little was said by participants about the provision of formal guidance when initial career choices were made. Perhaps partly as a consequence, across the sample, it was common to find interviewees in gender stereotyped occupations. For instance, women were found in hairdressing and beauty occupations, teaching, caring, catering, cleaning, sales and administrative roles, while men were found in agricultural, construction and technician occupations, as well as packing, driving and warehouse roles. However, male interviewees were also found in teaching and caring roles and one woman (Isadora, DK, 32), after seeking career guidance, chose to work as a woodcutting machinist. She stated

that she preferred to work in a male-dominated environment to avoid, what she referred to as, female-dominated environments that are characterised by 'gossip and scheming'.

Gender bias was also seen in the education system. Jean (FR, 29), who is a childcare assistant, noted that the health and social baccalaureate was recommend training for female students. He felt let down by the education system, as he believed there was gender bias in the options presented to male and female students. Although the health and social baccalaureate would have been his preferred choice, he was viewed as practical and presented with different options that were better suited to boys. Hélène (FR, 34) started an apprenticeship at an optician and spoke of being aware that her mentor thought girls were less gifted in manual work than boys. This made her more determined to be competent, working to a high standard. For others, such as teachers, mentors and parents, gender bias was about perceived behavioural differences: girls were viewed as 'good' and boys 'disruptive' (see, e.g. Miroslava, CZ, 27).

Perceived gender differences in abilities were also noted by some interviewees. Bjarke (DK, 32), who is a school teacher, commented that being a male in the sector is an advantage, as he knows several women who do not get a response to job applications where he has been shortlisted. One interviewee, Rostislav (CZ, 36), said that during a period of unemployment, the labour office offered him a qualification course in accounting. He refused to enrol on the course stating that: 'It was ridiculous. I don't have the capacities for this. I think it is more for women, I was always more attracted to engineering.' However, there was no other course available at that time.

Low aspirations were common among the interviewees. It was evident that, for some interviewees, aspirations for the type of work available to them were stereotypical. Iwona (PL, 38) who got pregnant at 16 years and dropped out of school, admitted to having no plans, deciding that she would not be able to go to trade school, but expected to work in a 'nice clothes shop'. For others, low aspirations were the result of doing what others of the same sex did. Mandy (DE, 26) spoke of choosing a secretarial training course because other girls did the same: she had a picture of 'girls' professions'. Stereotypes can sometimes be explicitly reinforced by peers through informal guidance.

Both male and female interviewees spoke of being distracted by the opposite sex, both within school and in their social lives. Many admitted to being influenced by their peers in terms of learning and attending school and this often reinforced gendered responses. One interviewee, Alicja (PL, 35), spoke of positive peer pressure and attended school because the other girls did: 'they

dragged me there […] I would have preferred to go to work […] work hard than studying'.

Some women spoke of feeling at a disadvantage in education and in the labour market due to their gender and having a family. When taking about her potential engagement in learning, Iva (CZ, 39), quoted earlier, said: 'It is very difficult for me to engage in any sort of training, because it would mean that I leave the kids at home alone for a result that is very uncertain.' The lack of formal guidance means it is difficult for individuals in such cases to imagine a different future and a pathway to that future.

4.3.4. Summary

Relatively weak formal qualifications arising from initial education and training are often problematic for subsequent career development. However, other aspects of initial education were sometimes highlighted by interviewees, especially where final school qualifications were influenced more by non-completion rather than attainment per se, or if they saw themselves as having useful skills in areas other than the academic. A focus on practical skills was often connected to a negative perception of formal education (too theoretical and/or disconnected from the needs of the labour market). The reality of higher level qualifications often being a prerequisite for career progression on the labour market was seen as a paradox by some interviewees, because they saw these as disconnected from the real level of skills. This can lead to different negative attitudes to formal education: bitterness, fatalism, regret, or categorical refusal to participate. It seems also that participants with higher educational aspirations saw a link between qualification and career development more than participants with lower educational aspirations.

Experiences in initial education can lead in very different directions later in life, even for the low-skilled. Some individuals carry a 'learning scar', others see learning as a means to achieve something else, while a third group perceives learning as an adult in a different way to learning at school. Experiences of initial schooling, particularly in relation to attainment of formal qualifications, had an immediate effect for many participants as they were confronted with barriers on the labour market connected to their lack of higher qualification (inability to access high-skilled positions). Some interviewees were able to establish themselves in the labour market despite their lack of formal qualifications. Although a minority, there are enough such cases, for a narrative to be established where experiences of formal education can be dismissed, with formal school qualifications being regarded as having little connection to the actual level

of skills of the person and how they perform in the real world. Such a narrative emphasises professional experience as opposite to formal qualifications.

The negative experience with initial education and difficulties in the transition from school to the labour market lead some low-skilled to perceive their education as completely disconnected from the needs of the labour market. This impression sometimes leads to the conviction that engaging in certain educational programmes does not translate into the development of useful labour market skills. Career guidance can also seem unhelpful if it reinforces the mantra that formal education, training and qualifications are valuable in the labour market and that obtaining these is a necessary step in accessing skilled work. Such messages are particularly likely to be transmitted in countries either with occupational labour markets, such as Germany, or those with high unemployment.

Career guidance was positively viewed when it involved coaching and individualised support for the unemployed. The positive results of individualised support are in line with the recent report on the effects of help offered by Danish job centres (Danish Ministry of Employment, 2014). Career guidance was also likely to be more positively evaluated if it could give access to a range of (preparatory) provision and make use of processes such as recognition of prior learning (RPL).

4.4. Continuing education, training and career development

For some interviewees, the notion of continuing education was closely connected to retraining for the unemployed. In Denmark this indicated a lack of knowledge about other possible forms of continuing education and training, but may also be related to the fact, that only retraining courses are free and thus relatively available for this category during unemployment. Engagement in continuing education sometimes provided ‘corrective experience’ with positive impact on willingness to participate. However, the relationship between retraining courses and career navigation is far from causal in the eyes of the low-skilled: many participants felt that such continuing education has very little value in the labour market and limited positive impact on their career development. Also, the ‘practical’ self-image is sometimes connected to the preference for informal learning compared to other forms. This only accentuates the need to broaden the access of the low-skilled to recognition of prior learning.

Across the Danish sample, interviewees demonstrated a high level of entrepreneurship and motivation to engage in learning. Some of these are

successful in what they do despite the different barriers they have experienced and their lack of formal qualifications.

According to Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory, humans are naturally interested in learning and developing. Both extrinsic and intrinsic factors regulate motivation. When people are intrinsically motivated they play, explore and engage in activities for the inherent fun, challenge, and excitement of doing so (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Motivation can be regulated externally through punishment/reward systems or ego stimulation via praise or the avoidance of shame. External and interjected regulation forms work as a kind of external pressure, where the individual is motivated by the response of the surroundings and is characterised as social control/influence. Further along the continuum of self-determination, we find identified and integrated regulation. Both are extrinsic but they are more autonomous forms of motivation, driven by identification with values and role models and the integration of values encountered in learning processes.

People's sense of volition and initiative is essential to support: 'the individual's experience of autonomy, competence and relatedness are argued to foster the most volitional and high quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities, including enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity' (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Autonomy, competence and relatedness are identified as three innate psychological needs that, if fulfilled, will allow people to function effectively and experience wellness. However, if needs are thwarted, people are more likely to act and experience the opposite. Ryan and Deci (2000) expect that self-determination plays a major role in educational achievements. However, education is also a domain where external controls are imposed: testing, grading, praise, compulsory participation in specific subjects, compulsory attendance, etc., are all external factors which influence motivation. This particular association is relevant for our study of drivers and barriers to learning among the low-skilled.

4.4.1. Career decision-making and learning

Career transitions and decisions reflected on by interviewees were examined using a career decision-making style typology, developed from a longitudinal study in England that tracked recipients of career guidance over a five-year period (Bimrose, et al., 2008; Bimrose and Barnes, 2007). The typology comprises four styles. Evaluative careerists approach career decisions through a process of self-appraisal (sometimes these are prolonged) and identification and evaluation of individual needs, values and abilities. Decisions are linked to a longer-term goal. Careerists displaying these traits are engaged in learning about themselves and so develop greater levels of self-awareness and self-knowledge.

Strategic careerists are proactively engaged in focused careers decisions. They adopted an approach that involves analysing, synthesising, reviewing advantages and disadvantages and setting plans and objectives. Decisions are carefully considered and directed towards achieving an ultimate goal.

Aspirational careerists approach career decisions based on distant, and sometimes unachievable, career goals. Decisions are intertwined with personal circumstances and priorities, so jobs often become a means to an end, but will contribute to the distant career goal and may not be directly relevant.

Opportunistic careerists adopt a very different approach to career decisions compared to other styles, often exploiting opportunities rather than making choices. These individuals frequently take opportunities as presented and will turn them to their advantage. There is often no career goal defined, but these careerists are happy with their situation until presented with a new opportunity. They can cope with high levels of uncertainty.

Within the interviews, it was evident that the interviewees adopted very different approaches to making career decisions and transitions within the labour market, which had ultimately impacted on their decision to engage in further learning as part of their career development. Two narratives are presented to explore the evaluative and strategic decision-making styles and how they shape learning and work pathways.

Cheryl's (UK, 34) narrative exemplifies an evaluative approach to decisions about learning and work. Cheryl is a single parent living in a small village. She was predicted to achieve A grades at GCSE ([8]), but at 13 started to have health problems and spent significant periods at hospital and at home. Cheryl sat nine GCSEs, but failed all. After leaving school, she went to college to retake five GCSEs and was again predicted A grades, but achieved C grades. Since leaving college, she has had a family and been regularly in and out of work. Cheryl only recently felt able to return to full-time work, as her children are older. She is now employed as a home care worker. She reflected on her pathway. The decisions she made were influenced by her personal needs and circumstances: 'I'd probably not change anything. Maybe go back to work sooner than I have. Knowing I can do this job and look after the kids, I could've started this quicker. When I left school there was not a career choice to make but despite having kids, I would hate to be a child-minder. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I think I

([8]) The general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) is an academically rigorous, internationally recognised qualification awarded in a specified subject, generally taken in several subjects by pupils in secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland over two years.

was that young when the illness started that I didn't look very far ahead. I wouldn't have stayed on anyway. I would've done a work-based thing, maybe hairdressing. I didn't want to go to university anyway.'

It is evident that Cheryl will continue to make decisions based on personal circumstances and family caring commitments. Her adult learning has been disrupted by her decisions to have children. Overall, she is not motivated to learn and only wants to learn what is required for her job.

Jason's (UK, 25) narrative exemplifies a strategic decision-making style. He lives and works in his home town. Jason attained 10 GCSE exams and achieved excellent results, gaining five grade A passes, four grade B passes and one C. Although he started sixth form, he did not complete. He sought career guidance, but he did not find it helpful. 'I went to Connexions and they put us onto the [regional location] Chamber of Commerce. I found the person to speak to and he visited us at work. The Connexions advice at the time wasn't anything special. It was just a case of looking at where I had to go to do what I needed to. I think it was a bit lacking that I had to do it all myself. I would've liked a list of named people to contact for help. School just wanted to keep me on. They were trying to push people into university and that kind of showed. I did a late application and got in because somebody else dropped out and I started in December at [a college] on an electrical installation apprenticeship.'

Jason was always determined to work in the family business, so took steps to get qualified. 'I wasn't allowed to join the business at first. My Mam said you're not going there. I think at the time Mam did want me to go to university but I think that she thought if the business was to go belly up we'd all be in the same boat. I think she's happier that if anything happened now I've got this qualification.'

Jason successfully completed an NVQ level 3 apprenticeship to become a qualified electrical installation engineer. He now works in the family business and continues to learn and gain new skills all with the aim of helping the business. His narrative reflects how he focused on his career pathway and learning to ensure he is a good position in the labour market. Jason perceives ongoing learning as essential for the survival and growth of the business. It is evident that he wants to study based on his motivation to grow professionally and secure the family business: 'after I finished my time [as an apprentice] I just carried on learning as I was going. I knew what I needed to do, but I kind of had to learn this trade too.'

The decision-making styles provide insights into how interviewees approach learning and the decisions on whether to participate or not in education and training opportunities. There were no distinctive patterns between decision-making style and learning experiences or outcomes. Strategic careerists were found to be generally more positive about their post compulsory learning and its

impact on their career development. Evaluative and aspirations careerists reflected on the barriers to learning and the implications. Learning for these careerists was about fulfilling a particular need. Opportunistic careerists were more likely to engage in learning linked to their current occupation.

4.4.2. Attitudes to and engagement with adult education

A number of the interviewees have positive attitudes to participation in adult education, seen as a way to improve their situation, their status or their business prospects. The value of education in present-day society seems engraved in their understanding of how to better their position socially and economically. However, to some of the interviewed, adult education, however desirable, does not seem an option.

In the case of Søren (DK, 28), it is the ambivalent attitude to adult education which stands out. Søren has worked as social pedagogue assistant for 10 years and has the option of undertaking accreditation of prior learning (APEL) process and qualification as social pedagogue in reduced time; if his workplace is interested, he can do it while working and earning a full salary. However, Søren is not interested partly due to lack of interest in full qualification partly due to the time factor. He has no problems engaging in short courses related to his work and when asked about the difference between participation in these courses and going through the formal programme, he says: 'Three weeks and three and a half years, I guess.' So, on the one hand, Søren is positive towards engaging in work-related adult education and on the other hand he fails to manage the idea of three years dedicated to education. When describing his experiences with basic schooling, Søren uses the word 'restless', and somehow this restlessness is also a key characteristic of his adulthood.

For Norberto (IT, 30) the decision to go back to school and get a diploma represents a more mature attitude towards life. The education outcomes for him are mostly at cultural level, and evening school is good enough for this. There he has to study technical disciplines but he can tackle literature and history as well. He feels now able to repair the low-learning scar that still marks him, and feels well beyond the level of average young persons of his origin, even in terms of 'a better understanding of situations'. 'School is preparing me from a cultural point of view [...] now I see more what it can give me on a human perspective. If you make mistakes, school teaches you certain things, helps you in understanding situations. For example, I like very much speaking with young people, and I realise that often they're 'lifeless', […] they're not hungry. They see no perspectives and they leave the country […] they're right, if nobody offers them a decent living […] it is a very bad situation, they're not protected […] But still

they’re dull, they get discouraged by little stupid things. In my opinion, sometimes a slap is good for you […]. I’ve always benefitted from trying to reflect a little more.’

In contrast with Norberto, Rosina (IT, 27) takes a practical approach to formal learning and to its educational outcomes. Her previous experiences are a powerful lesson for her, which shaped her views about the importance of sound education outcomes. When she was a teenager, although financially able to continue her studies after compulsory education, she decided against this option, attracted by an easier and faster way to become an independent adult. Now she shows the same autonomy with a different life project. She is determined to change her life course now, and sees education as the means to do it. She appreciates what is learned in evening school, but at the end, due to her approach to learning, she understands that professional practice is something different. ‘There are very good teachers here, always ready to help in understanding things well. I'm happy about what I found in this school. But working in the accountant's office I realised that there are many other, more practical things that are not written in books.’

Being able to ‘do the right thing’ is what Rosina aspires to more than everything else. Her approach to learning seems to reflect an internal split between content and values on one the one hand (to be learned at school) and work behaviour on the other hand (to be put in practice at work). Her feeling for the importance of the latter has been informed largely from previous work and life experiences. These were hard and she had to develop strong, resilient attitudes. She had to marshal her positive social and emotional traits to survive being a young woman alone in the big city, forced to spend most of her time in a hostile environment: ‘In the beautician centre where I worked in the first period in Rome (one year and a half) they were in a bad mood all day long. The owners were incredibly nasty. In the second centre I had problems with the other girls. I was the newcomer and they were always around me teasing and challenging. As I'm easy in replying, there were fights every time. They wanted me subdued, I didn't. I have a clear idea about my own rights [...] I don't want to clean up what's others' duty.’

Now, in an accountant's office, the environment is much calmer. She does not have to deal with young, aggressive girls but with mature adults. She appreciates this very much. There is a sort of link, within her narrative, between learning well and living well, in which her acquired life skills play an important role.

Gabriele (IT, 34) is another example of mature and autonomous reflexivity. In his narrative are echoes of an internal conversation in which his own

existential situation is thoroughly pondered. His past experiences have a relevant influence in valuing his present path in learning, as both student in the accountancy school and computer assistant in the bank. After a long period of confusion, in which he engaged with many different temporary job situations, Gabriele realised that he really needed to change his circumstances. He tried, without success, to find courses for professional preparation in computer-related disciplines, then he found a job in a bank and, after work, went to evening school: 'At a certain point in my life I realised that there is no chance for those who, like me, do not hold the 'piece of paper' [the colloquial term for the diploma or even for the university degree]. And that, at the same time, there are very few opportunities for acquiring a qualification […]. Now I understand that this school is a rare opportunity: it was an excellent choice. I can fulfil at least partly my interest in informatics. This school is the best for me. I have some problems with teachers who run too fast in the study programme, but this is only a small detail. They understand our problems, our needs. They are really supportive' (IT, 34).

He realises that he is not in a particularly privileged position: 'This diploma is very important for me, but on its own it is nothing special. The market is full of people holding a degree'. However, it represents a basis for a presence in the labour market and for progressing through the personal and professional infrastructure that he built up in the last phase of his life. Through the accounting school he discovered his capabilities even in mathematics (which were previously weak). And he realised the importance of interacting with others in bringing some kind of serenity.

There are others, however, with mixed feelings and expectations about adult education and for some there is regret. For example, Mirko's (IT, 26) information about working life came from friends and neighbours. He also looked for help from public institutions, in terms of both career counselling and placement [these are separate services in the city of Rome]. He found that people in counselling were kind and driven by supportive attitudes: they helped him write a curriculum vitae (CV) and gave him basic information on how to search for a job. They also had open and frank discussions with him. In contrast, those in the placement office were simply 'cold' bureaucrats who just registered his application saying that they would call him later; but then he had no call, or further information. He also tried with temporary work agencies, but had no positive reply. Mirko seems totally inconsistent in his perception of education outcomes. The idea of rejoining an educational path generates only regret in him, or stimulates dreams like the one of having had the chance to attend university courses and to get a degree. He did not learn any skills from his father - who was excellent in masonry, hydraulics, and electricity – and so realises his human capital is weak. He

expresses this as follows: ‘Being 26 years old, I just have to think to create a quiet life for myself. If I were able to study and get a diploma, I would have done it before […]. Now it is late.’

Engagement with the CVET system in Denmark could lead individuals to re-evaluate their attitudes to learning and their future. Jeanette (DK, 33) did not have positive learning experiences until she started a short vocational education programme. Before that she had never felt supported in her learning, either from parents or school. While she is studying she participates in a school activity which has become a very positive learning experience for her: ‘They had something at the school in the last internship period. We all got together at the school for a week around half way through the internship. I think that was really great. You could meet and talk to your classmates about where you were and what you would like to be different and talk about it. And they don’t do that any more, that’s a shame [...]. If you are weak, you drop out and our contact persons are at the school, you don’t call them, you don’t use them. I think we would [call them] if we came to the school and talked about how we are doing.’

The example of Jeanette points to the role of being part of a social community as an important element in creating positive learning experiences. This is in line with the idea of self-determination of Ryan and Deci (2000), who point to three psychological needs playing a role in motivation: autonomy, the feeling of being competent, and the feeling of belonging. Across the interviews, the interviewees attach different value to each of these three elements, implying that to some people the feeling of belonging may be the most important need.

Beth (DK, 33) showed considerable autonomy in how she accessed the learning required to build her career. She recognised her own strengths and competences and made active choices to support these, while acknowledging ‘I was never academically sharp but I have always known that too, so it was okay.’ Beth did not enter the formal education system but instead paid her own way through several private course programmes/educations which has enabled her to set up her own business both as a makeup artist and as a yoga instructor. ‘Making it for herself’ and becoming a successful business person seem to have been important goals for Beth; perhaps even more so because she chose a career path and a field of work that her family for many years neither understood nor supported.

Ellinor (DK, 28) is an example of someone who recently entered an adult education programme with the aim of improving the financial situation of her family, anticipating higher wages for skilled jobs. However, her new experience of education has opened her mind regarding the possibility of potentially educating herself even further: ‘Now, I would like to complete my commercial training. And

then I'll see. Maybe I would like to continue my studies. I can't say, but right now […] just to complete it. Maybe it turns out that I want to do something else when I have completed it. Maybe I think, well, now I want to do something else. But we have to see. Now I want to complete it. That's the objective.'

Susanne (DK, 29) sees her adult education as an investment in the future. On completion, she will receive a higher salary and she feels that she is less likely to become a victim of the recurring cut backs in the social care sector. She also talks about the need to do something else in the future. She thinks that the job as a social care helper will wear her down and that she will not be able to do it for the rest of her working years, due to the extensive lifting and carrying tasks. She does not know what else she could be doing.

Beth (DK, 33) also perceives learning as a means to provide new career possibilities for her. She has been self-employed as a makeup-artist for most of her working life but, last year, a business partner told her about the possibility to have her prior learning validated and then do the four-year hairdresser's education in reduced time [in the GVU education programme]. The formal requirement for this is at least two years of relevant work experience and although Beth only has work experience as a makeup artist working alongside hairdressers, she successfully convinced the school to validate her competences as a hairdresser while attending different courses instead of going through the whole VET programme. This had never been done before, but the school accepted her, and she is now completing the four-year hairdresser programme in just 13 months. Beth chose this education because she expects this strategy to expand the area of her own future business. Although she has not yet finished school, she has plans ready: 'I have a company plan completely ready. I want to think in terms of smart solutions. I know that business men have a hard time making time to get a haircut… so we will make a team who will go to them. Like a massage therapist. [...] I want to have makeup stylists do jobs for me… Freelance under me. Like I have free-lanced under somebody. I think it is about time that I give out assignments because I think I can. [...] My dream is to create a concept that can work all over the world. I mean, you have to think big and dream a little. Nothing wrong with that. I think it is fine to have ambitions.'

Besides Beth's dream to become self-employed, to live up to family traditions, and perhaps even to start a brand new concept within makeup and hair customer solutions, learning a new field of work might also provide Beth with the basis of a more structured work life. She says: 'To me it is to ease the pressures. To go to the same place every day. To have a base and let people come to me […] within the last couple of years I have felt a need for a more

structured work life […] so I wouldn't always have that stress factor to have to go out and search for more work, new projects. It doesn't work anymore.'

A positive experience with continuing education and training sometimes resulted in a change of attitudes towards learning in general. Participants often indicated that their participation in continuing training was seen as a positive surprise; after theoretical and not particularly useful initial education, the continuous training was experienced as practical, down-to-earth and connected to the requirements of the labour market. This change of perception can be perhaps also explained by the fact that participation in continuing training was voluntary, so the initial motivations and expectations were different compared to initial education.

Jiřina (CZ, 29) also had a very positive experience with nail-shaping courses and this contributed to her willingness to educate herself further: 'I think that the main difference between school and training is that in the courses I want to improve myself and get better. Whereas at school, there is a teacher asking you questions, giving you exams and you have to do it. I do the course because I want to, but at school I worked because I had to.'

Jana (CZ, 32) talks about her experience with a retraining course in a very enthusiastic way. The positive experience also impacted her willingness to participate in educational activities: 'The retraining was amazingly good. I think this course gave me more than the VET school […] The main difference between school and this course I think was that at school we had just lots of theory, while on the requalification course the lecturer made us work on real examples, real documents from real companies. At school it was just lots of theoretical 'sauce' that you will never need in real life. And this is true for today's kids, they learn lots of unnecessary things.'

Rosina (IT, 27) had initially tried to carry on as a beautician, following her move from a village in southern Italy to Rome, but she had difficulties in her work environment. So she radically changed her aim. Through an intense reflexive process she took up again the idea of pursuing a career in accounting, which she had once considered at school. She enrolled in the accounting evening school and found a place in an accounting firm as an apprentice. She is very close to the end of both the educational path and the apprenticeship contract. She has good chances of getting a long-term position, as she significantly developed in the profession, but she is not totally sure about her future direction. Continuing education and training is her chosen path for vocational recovery to a skilled position. However, although Rosina formally meets the criteria of being unskilled in not finishing her schooling, not completing her initial training and becoming unemployed, in another sense her set-backs relate more to her environment than

to her underlying ability. She had performed well at school when she was there and, if she had had the desire, she could have engaged in accounting training in initial VET.

Some interviewees who engaged in continuing non-formal education (retraining) did not acquire a positive attitude to education. The main reasons were lack of labour market opportunities. They are convinced that, contrary to formal qualification, non-formal education does not have much value on the labour market and is only interesting for personal enrichment or a way of meeting new people.

Iva (CZ, 39) participated in retraining proposed by the labour office, which later helped her to find a job as a secretary. However, after her parental leave, the company went bankrupt and she could not find a job in this field. She is persuaded that it is because non-formal education still has less value than formal education on the labour market: 'But as I see it, no certificate will ever make me an engineer, like a requalification course won't make you an accountant – there is very little value in these certificates on the labour market.' 'I tried some requalification courses – accountancy and computer skills. Yeah, sure, it was nice, because it allowed women like me to meet and to 'escape' their kids and their household, but in the end, it didn't get me anywhere' (CZ, 39).

Alice (CZ, 33) is convinced that despite the availability of retraining for the unemployed, this is not a solution for finding a job with higher level of skills. Employers will always prefer people with higher formal education level: 'I think that when you come to a job interview and they see that you only did a requalification course, they will say: 'Ah, so you didn't learn this at school, sorry, bye […] At school you learn these things for two or three years, but learning them in one or two months? Not possible.'

Michele (IT, 41) does not reject, in principle, the idea of going back to school or vocational training. He does not blame school itself, or the teachers, for his previous 'failure', as much as his own behaviour and choices. At the age of 41 he is starting to realise that he might have missed opportunities due to his lack of formal qualifications (for example, he thinks that his brother could have placed him in a 'comfortable' white-collar position). During the second interview for the research study, he said that he is going to take 20 private lessons from an IT specialist, to learn computer basics and also 'something more advanced'. While, this interest for computers was only stated in the first interview, now he has taken concrete steps to start learning something new. Whether this investment will have a professional outcome or not, is difficult to predict. But this vocational training experience might trigger new reactions and lead Michele towards a new approach to learning.

4.4.3. Recognition of prior learning

There are seven social pedagogue assistants in the Danish sample and most of them have been encouraged to go through accreditation of prior learning (APEL, see Box 1) to gain a qualification as either skilled social pedagogue assistant (a relatively new programme) or a bachelor degree as a social pedagogue. Both Søren (DK, 28) and Jonas (DK, 26) have been encouraged to take the APEL for the social pedagogue programme but have declined. Neither see it as an attractive career pathway, having negative experiences with the working conditions of social pedagogues. Søren: 'If I look at the social pedagogues today, I don't want to be a one, and it has to do […] with their working environment, i.e. the working conditions, you just have to be more and more effective.' Jonas: 'I don't think that the social pedagogue occupation is recognised as it should be. People think, well, you just take care of children. I think people would be shocked if they had to work here for a week and saw what we did'.

Martin (DK, 28) and Henrik (DK, 38) have also been encouraged to go through APEL, but in relation to the skilled social pedagogue assistant. Martin has embraced the opportunity and is very positive about participating: 'If you ask me, this education is tailor-made for me. More so than the bachelor degree in social education [pedagogue]. Because that one is more administrative, whereas this one is more about how to handle different situations. I am learning new concepts, Freud and the like, Daniel Stern. In this short time we've been introduced to eight theorists. That is exactly what I have been longing for, so that I can keep up with qualified staff' (Martin).

Henrik, in contrast, entered the programme reluctantly. The factor that persuaded him was that he receives full wages while studying. His perception of the programme is generally negative and he criticises the level for being too low in stark contrast to Martin who describes the level as 'university level' [they are taking the same course]. Henrik admits that his negative attitude is 'part of his personality': 'To be honest, I'm better at focusing at the negative than the positive'.

Martin and Henrik provide contrasting cases in their attitudes to being enrolled in the pedagogue assistant programme: Martin has a positive attitude to the programme and its outcome, while Henrik has a negative attitude to the programme and its outcome. Martin is proud of the work he is doing as a social pedagogue assistant and the difference he is making in the life of the young men he is caring for. Henrik does not think about the difference he is making in the lives of the handicapped children that he is caring for – despite going to some lengths by taking them bivouacking and teaching them to be self-reliant. The major difference seems to be the meaning they ascribe to their working life and

the feeling of making a difference to people's lives. Henrik has his identity elsewhere, in his spare time activities, while Martin has his identity in the job and in relation to his brother who is working in the same institution. Henrik has no sense of direction in his working life and has never had an idea of what he wants to 'become': 'I have never known whether I wanted to be a fireman or a policeman so the question is if I should do what I did when I started cleaning, just take the leap and see what happens.'

It can be concluded from the Danish narratives that the recognition of prior learning is encouraged by managers within the professions of social pedagogue assistant, kitchen assistant and social and health care helper. Several of the unskilled social pedagogue assistants interviewed for this project were either participating in a course or had been encouraged to do so by their managers. The conditions for participating in recognition of prior learning are favourable because the workplace will pay for the employee participation in the programme while being employed and, after completion, the employee will return to his/her job and be entitled to higher wages (see Box 1). This was the case of Henrik, Martin, Beatrice and Jeanette.

4.4.4. Summary

Continuing education and training could play a role in the career development of our interviewees in several ways. First, it could act as a recognised pathway for continuing vocational development, including retraining if unemployed, with at least the prospect of more stable employment. For some interviewees, the notion of continuing education was closely connected to retraining for the unemployed, because such retraining was provided free of charge. Second, it could help with basic skill development of those who performed poorly in literacy and numeracy in initial education and training. Third, it could facilitate changes in career direction of those seeking to work in areas different from those in which they previously worked.

Engagement in continuing education sometimes acted as a positive experience to overcome the effects of scarring associated with learning experiences in initial education and training. This 'corrective experience' could then have a positive impact on the willingness to participate in further learning activities. However, some interviewees continued to avoid education and training and/or believe that the types of continuing education on offer to them had very little value on the labour market. This attitude was sometimes reinforced by a preference for informal learning associated with the interviewees' 'practical' self-image.

Box 1: **Recognition of prior learning in Denmark**

The right to recognition of prior learning has been institutionalised in Denmark. The law provides all citizens with the right to a process of RPL at all levels of the education and training system. Act No 555 covers the following programmes:

- subjects at primary and lower secondary level (AVU) at adult education centres (VUC);
- general upper secondary subjects at VUC;
- adult vocational training (AMU);
- adult vocational education and training programmes (GVU);
- short-cycle post-secondary adult education (VVU);
- medium-cycle post-secondary adult education (diploma degrees) (Andersen and Laugesen, 2012).

Andersen and Laugesen carried out an evaluation of recognition of prior learning in Denmark as an answer to the call from the OECD that there was a lack of information on recognition of prior learning (Werquin, 2010). The evaluation showed that adult vocational training (AMU and GVU) is the sector with the highest level of recognition of prior learning activity (Andersen and Laugesen, 2012, p. 12). However, their evaluation stressed that there is lack of public awareness of the possibility of recognition of prior learning. Most of the participants in their survey 'were made aware of the possibility through their employer' (Andersen and Laugesen, 2012, p.10), while adult career guidance played a surprisingly low role in raising awareness about recognition of prior learning.

The occupations of social pedagogue assistant and social and health care helper/assistant (9) are organised under the Federation of Public Employees (FOA). FOA has a strong focus on access to adult education for their members, who are generally to be found among unskilled and low-skilled groups in the Danish population. FOA has advocated access to adult education, which was achieved in 2008 when the collective agreement (2008 to 2013) between FOA and the Government (KL, representing the 98 municipalities in Denmark) included the right to education for unskilled members of FOA. As part of the agreement, KL has agreed to establish 15 000 extra adult apprenticeships until 2015 and also to strengthen access to recognition of prior learning for the unskilled. If an unskilled worker has two years of relevant and coherent work experience within the sector and is above the age of 25, he or she has the right to go through RPL and participate in formal education. Social pedagogue assistants have, according to the agreement, for example the right to extraordinary leave if they want to acquire the formal qualification.

These findings point to the importance of cooperation between major actors in the labour market. The collective agreements can be a tool to increase both access to adult education and visibility of the offers at hand. The FOA involves their shop stewards in identifying employees who could benefit from recognition of prior learning and have developed a number of tools and information leaflets that the shop stewards

(9) Figures from FOA show that the number of full-time equivalent students enrolled in GVU was around 320 in 2012 and 2013 for the social pedagogue assistant programme, while participation in the social and health care helper and assistant programmes has been substantially lower. Also, there around 20 full-time equivalent students per year for social and health care helper, and around 30 for social and health care assistant.

can make use of. The employers (municipalities) are obliged to offer their unskilled employees the possibilities of recognition of prior learning and subsequent participation in VET. Our interviews show that the employers honour this obligation and encourage employee adult education. Public support structures are important and, in the case of Denmark, the public provision of adult education is substantial, as reflected in the fact that one third of the adult population participates in adult education.

Willingness to engage in continuing education was partly influenced by individual career decision-making style (Bimrose, et al., 2008; Bimrose and Barnes, 2007). Evaluative careerists were reflexive about their career direction based on their needs, values and abilities. Decisions were then linked to longer-term goals. This meant that they were often aware of the role that continuing education and training could play in developing their skills and achieving their career goals. The evaluative careerists interviewed had learned about themselves and their narratives showed high levels of self-awareness and self-knowledge.

Strategic careerists were similarly proactive, but their focus was more rational, following focused careers decisions and the path chosen, rather than being genuinely reflexive. Their analytical approach involves reviewing advantages and disadvantages, setting plans and trying to implement them. Decisions are carefully considered and are likely to be realistic; interviewees who had a natural affinity for this style of decision-making would be willing to consider whether continuing education and training could help them achieve their goals.

Aspirational careerists approach career decisions based on distant, and sometimes unachievable, career goals, their decisions influenced by personal circumstances, priorities and passions; there is less attention on immediate concerns about jobs, work and the role of continuing education and training. Jonas (DK, 26) was a classic example, with his desire to become a sports journalist and to make a living out of his passion for football.

Opportunistic careerists do not display as much planning, and if their initial education and training had not played a major positive role in how their career had evolved, then they were much less likely to see the need for a major commitment to continuing education and training. Their whole approach to career decisions is based on exploiting opportunities rather than making choices. In some respects, their flexibility and ability to cope with high levels of uncertainty means they are quite well placed to thrive in rapidly changing labour markets. However, where such opportunism is not underpinned by some level of expertise which is in demand in the labour market, they can be squeezed out of

employment by those who are more highly qualified if the number of job opportunities is outweighed by the number of applicants available.

4.5. Aspirations and future orientation

Lindstrom et al. (2007) stress how individuals with a low socioeconomic family background are, through informal cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), less likely to enter higher education or even complete upper-secondary education. If they enter low-skilled work as an alternative to continuing their education and training they can sometimes find other work by drawing on contacts or networks developed through work. Social capital, developed through participation in work-related networks, can play a role in helping individuals sustain their employability (Brown, 2005), even though their networks and social capital may be more restricted than for other groups. Informal learning associated with personal networks could result in individuals hearing about job opportunities and different ways of developing their skills, knowledge and experience (Brown, 2005).

Savage (2011), through cohort analyses in the UK, outlines how the risk of slipping down the earnings ladder has increased for the less educated. For the last 20 years, not holding a degree-level qualification decreased the chances of upward mobility by 37%. Similarly, the chances of moving down increased for non-graduates, as the proportion of workers with a degree increased. Gautié and Schmitt (2010) compare the plight of low-wage workers in the US to five European countries: Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands and the UK. Since the early 1990s the UK, the Netherlands, and Germany have all seen substantial increases in low-wage jobs. However, employers in retail sales, hospitals, food processing, hotels, and call centres can often demand skill sets which those with little education and training may struggle to meet.

The literature on the impact of socioeconomic backgrounds on the aspirations, expectations and educational choices is extensive. In the UK, Ball et al. (1999) outline the very different choices and imagined futures of young people with different social and educational backgrounds. Beck et al. (2006) examine the impact of gender and ‘race’ on young people’s perceptions of their post-compulsory education, appropriate apprenticeships and labour market opportunities, and how their thinking often aligns with stereotypes of the type of work to which they aspire. Brooks (2003; 2004) researched the role of family and friends in young people’s education choice. Connor (2001), Connor and Dewson (2001), Forsyth and Furlong (2000) and Gorard et al. (2006) examine the factors affecting decisions whether or not to participate in higher education for those

from low social class groups, while Nixon (2006) investigated the employment aspirations and the meaning of work for low-skilled men in the service economy.

Knighton (2002) reviewed the effects of parents' education and household income on post-secondary participation, while focusing on the impact of peer groups on the intention to stay on at 16. Ball and Vincent (1998), in the context of secondary school choice, made the distinction between 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge: the former being supplied through social networks and trusted relationships, the latter supplied by schools and experts. Ball (2003) later generalised this to other decisions made by young people and reiterated how they mistrusted 'cold' official knowledge and relied instead on 'hot' knowledge that connected more directly with their life experience. Decisions about career enactment have to be placed in a particular spatial, labour market and sociocultural context: individuals are taking decisions within particular 'opportunity structures' and their decisions and aspirations are further framed by their understanding of such structures (Roberts, 2009).

Low-skilled work can be regarded as that which makes few demands in terms of practical skills, cognitive skills, social skills or the affective domain (Felstead et al., 2007). It offers limited opportunities for psychomotor, cognitive, social or emotional development and mastery, the reward of doing something well (Sennett, 2008). It is also important to distinguish between low-skilled and low-paid work because, although they often go together, this is not always the case; an example is as consequence of historic gender inequalities in the labour market (Acker, 2006).

Low-paid work is often clustered by industry, occupation and social class and gives rise to certain problems irrespective of skill level (Lloyd et al., 2008), but the quality of jobs in terms of their skill content can also be problematic for individuals. Being in low-skilled work, where this is associated with lack of autonomy and discretion over work increases the likelihood of an individual suffering stress, which may spill over to other areas of their life (Marmot et al., 1991).

For some people low-skilled work is not something which they see themselves 'passing through' but rather a setting which reflects their view of their 'natural place' (Nixon, 2006). The relative lack of inter-generational mobility in some societies (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2008) means that where other family members are in low-skilled employment and/or experience significant spells of unemployment, young people from lower class backgrounds are much more likely to settle for such work over a long period of time. Where employment opportunities allow, individuals may engage in considerable job-hopping, which can help them build up their skills, but such choices may still be confined to

relatively low-skilled work. In such settings, individual career choice operates within the boundaries of the opportunity structures available (Roberts, 2009), which reflect inter-relationships between factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, family and place, as well as labour market processes and employers' recruitment practices. These factors operate to favour particular and different career routes and pathways for people from different backgrounds and locations, partly depending on the social and cultural capital on which individuals can draw, including different ideas of what is regarded as 'doing well'. Most people look for work where they will fit in and can cope, but for those young people from lower social class backgrounds who have not performed well in school, problems are likely to be compounded if they are unable to embark on stable and progressive careers (Bradley and Devadson, 2008).

4.5.1. Links between learning and future career development

Interviewees were asked to discuss and reflect on the role of learning in their future progression. For some, future learning was aimed at improving employment prospects and keeping skills up to date for a particular occupation. For Jim (UK, 32) the learning he had undertaken in previous roles had culminated in his current one. He spoke of putting his experience and skills into practice, so he was happy in his current role: 'So, really it was an opportunity to really make the most of all my experience over the years, in one job. So, it's ended up being the perfect role I have at the moment and I'm really very happy and hope to stay here a very long time.'

Jim would be happy to continue learning, as he has a positive outlook and can see the importance of learning new skills. For him, learning is about the next step in work. He also comments on the role of qualifications and the importance of career development in work pathways: 'Certificates mean different things to different people. To me it means unlocking a door to get something I already have. For some people who move jobs frequently, having qualifications is far more valuable. This might not be a job for life, so it's always best to better yourself. Although I'm not expecting to move, however, at this moment in time I probably wouldn't put the time and effort into it don't feel I need further qualifications. I don't feel incompetent in any part of the job I do. If I did, I'd want the training.'

For others, future learning and career development was continuous and an important part of their narrative. For instance, Pam (UK, 34) had been quite strategic in her learning and work pathway. The decisions she made resulted from her understanding and appreciation that qualifications and experience would help her progress in her chosen career. In fulfilling her goal to be a hairdresser,

she found a course that provided on-the-job training and a day release to college that provided the experience she wanted. However, the career development opportunities were limited and Pam had been confident in her decision to leave that job to secure a better development opportunity: 'I looked for another job where they would train me. I knew that I needed to be qualified and this was going to be the best way of learning for me. Learning by doing. I finished the day release training in 18 months.'

Others appreciated the role of learning and future career development, but were, at the time of the interview, considering whether and how they could undertake further learning. Donna (UK, 28) lacked confidence and future development was carefully weighed up: 'An NVQ level 3 in Health and Social Care would give me more job possibilities including the possibility of working in a hospital. There are practical difficulties that would need to be solved. I have been offered a chance to do the course through work, but I need to find the time. I'd need to go to college one day a week and do it all in my own time so I'm having a think [...] at least that would mean I've got a bit more [training].'

Ultimately, earnings were a priority due to her circumstances, so any learning had to be paid by her employer and undertaken through work. Donna was concerned with how learning would fit with her family commitments. The costs and implications of travel were also a concern.

For Jack (UK, 28), future career development opportunities were about improving his skills to perform his job better and to broaden his expertise to expand his job role. Future career development was undertaken with the aim of effectively managing the family business. Only one interviewee stated that qualifications were a stepping stone and did not count for much.

Parents were also found to have a negative impact on individuals returning to education. Claire (UK, 31) is married and has three young children. She works as a temporary sales assistant in an independent department store. Claire had left school with three GCSEs at grade C, three at grade D and three at grade E with, as she confesses, minimal revision. Although keen to continue onto sixth form and post-compulsory education, her dad was set against it. While her mum might have supported her, nothing was said so Claire followed her father's wishes and left school at 16. Claire has a severe lack of confidence and self-esteem, which has continued throughout her learning and work pathway to date. This, coupled with the lack of support from her mother, has stopped her returning to education and participating in any career development: 'I'm not capable or clever enough. Even my mum said it'd be really, really hard work you know, but I could tell that she was meaning I wasn't quite bright enough. She's straight to the

point. I think she just thinks how you would manage to do it with three kids and a job.'

When asked if she would return to education she said: 'I just don't know if I've got the [stopped talking]. I think because I've been out of education for so long I don't think I would be able to. I'm not the best speller. I'd do fine if I could write everything on the computer [...] I think people don't think I'm bright enough and then I think probably I'm not. Imagine if I were doing it, I'd think my god I don't understand any of this [...] I'd never have a clue about how hard it would be at university.'

Claire's engagement with learning to date has been reactive, responding to immediate issues of concern and gaining employment.

For Cheryl (UK, 34), her poor experience at school had negatively impacted on her learning pathway. She disliked learning and so limited future learning to that required for her job: 'My worst experience was school and not being able to do my exams and stuff. The only learning I would do now would be through work and actually doing the job and getting qualified for it rather than sitting at a desk.'

The focus on practical skills that is typical among the research sample can sometimes result in positive attitudes to informal learning, as opposed to other forms. Informal learning is considered the only form of learning that is meaningful, because it is connected to the reality of a specific occupation. Also, informal learning is sometimes viewed as having a compensatory role for insufficient initial education. Rudolf (CZ, 39) had a positive experience with initial education; however, he values practical skills gained through experience over the knowledge and skills developed through formal education. He also claims that skills gained through informal learning had more value from the point of view of his career development: 'If you like work done properly, you don't need a lot of learning. I just watched once, knew what the result should look like and that was it – this was enough for me. […] I learned everything on the go: as they say, life is the best teacher.'

Juraj (CZ, 38) considers his initial education as completely disconnected from the situation on the labour market. However, he managed to develop a certain level of skills through informal learning during his career in construction: 'I think I have some expertise in carpentry, soldering, but I gained it by years of practice and life experience. […] I worked a lot with crews that were very competent: everyone knew very precisely their job and knew what to do. They taught me things I should have known from school.'

Future career development and progression for some interviewees was focused on consolidating skills and experience to improve their current employment position. For others, career development was simply a part of their

learning narrative and an activity they engaged with regularly as part of performing their job well. A minority were unable to think about the future or lacked confidence and so were unable to consider career development and what it would mean for their work pathway.

This driver for learning is illustrated by narratives of individuals who are goal-oriented in terms of their learning. For these individuals, learning is not simply about a short-term fixed plan to improve their position in the labour market or gain financial rewards. Rather, it is a longer term goal that is broader encompassing the self-improvement, a tangible dream or a better life. For some, learning is, and was, about owning their own business, turning an interest into a career and imaging a positive future self or new identity.

Laura (DK, 38) exemplifies a goal-oriented person with a strategic career decision-making style. She has had career goals derived from personal interest and has been engaging in work and learning focused on attaining these goals. After secondary school she worked to save money so that she could travel and see the world. However, she always knew that she wanted to become a tailor and this is what she pursued when she finished travelling. At this point in life, Laura was driven by a need to prove her worth: ‘I have always had a drive. I have always had a need to prove myself, to my mother and to myself.’ Laura’s mother had entered different education programmes during her life but had not finished any and hence always worked in unskilled jobs. Early in life, Laura was determined to get an education, and she ended up finishing two in a row. First, she qualified as a tailor, next as a design technologist. At this point in life she met her husband and they started a family. In four years they had two children. When she had to return to the labour market she found it hard. The trade was not what she expected, and she found it hard to combine work life and family life the way she wanted it. Laura then found work as an unskilled kitchen assistant working part time and no weekends: ‘I thought, I've always enjoyed cooking and I am the creative type. So, I thought to become a kitchen assistant in a day care centre. It was just a revelation that came to be.’ Laura’s goal has changed. She has proven to herself and her mother that she is capable of completing an education. Now, she has a rather pragmatic approach to work and education. She is very inspired by her new career and she talks about taking it further if it was not for the priority of the family: ‘It might be cool to become a bachelor of nutrition. It is very interesting. But I don’t want to work in a restaurant, because I don’t want to work weekends, I want to have time for my kids, so I only want to work 8 to 4. And that is always on my mind. I don’t want to be a stressed mother. I want to be a mother and I want to enjoy my children. It is important for me. It is the most important

thing in my life. It is important that I do something on a daily basis that I enjoy. But my children come first, 100%.'

However, one narrative illustrates that, for some, learning is aimed at future goals, but the future can be uncertain. Susanne (DK, 29) sees her adult education as an investment in the future. On completion she will receive a higher salary and she feels that she is less likely to become a victim of recurring cutbacks in the social care sector. She also talks about the need to do something else in the future. She thinks that the job as a social care helper has the potential to be mentally and physically tiring and that she will not be able to continue for the rest of her working years due to the extended lifting and carrying tasks. Susanne is unsure of her future.

Starting an education programme may be a challenge to the unskilled and low-skilled workers' identity. They have to find a new life focus on top of some they have already established. The development of a new identity simultaneously means discarding parts of the old (Illeris, 2010). In many of the narratives the aspiration to gain a professional identity as a driver for learning is seen. A part of the 'drive' stems from a wish to be recognised by others such as family and friends. For some learning was about imagining a positive future self or an identity change; for dome, imagining access to a perceived socially higher job was a reason to consider and engage in learning to improve career opportunities. One interviewee states: 'Just by going to the factory day after day with my greasy hair and my depressing greasy overalls, I reckoned there must be something else I could do. It really had to be time for a change'. Another tells that he was glad to use a lot of skills he learned in his other jobs and to supervise workers he could teach these skills. He was proud to take over responsibilities. The idea of having a positive role or of being given responsibilities increases self-esteem, which has a positive influence on motivation.

In contrast, Jonas' (DK, 26) drivers for learning seem to be external. He refers to his friends who have a university degree and to his idea of the 'good life', which includes a university degree and a family. It is Jonas' dream to become a sports journalist, and he explains, that there is a possibility to improve the chances of being accepted to this particular education if you do voluntary work. 'I have actually considered it, but the problem is that if you want to work voluntarily, you have to work full-time, and then you're not paid. I cannot do that. You have a flat that you have bought and stuff like that, so it is rather difficult not having any income.'

Money is also a driver for Jonas because he cannot imagine staying in his present job where wages a low: 'I don't earn a lot [as a social pedagogue assistant'. Jonas does not seem to have his identity tied up in being 'unskilled' or

a social pedagogue assistant. His strongest driver seems to be his ambition to become a professional and to earn the kind of money that can provide him with a comfortable lifestyle. In the follow-up interview, it is apparent that Jonas' identity is also linked to being a sports fan, especially football. His wish to become a sports journalist stemmed from his interest in football and a wish to combine interest and working life.

Most interviewees recognised and understood the need for learning as part of developing their career and future work pathway. In Denmark, three of the programmes under consideration were for VET (EQF level 4) and two were bachelor programmes (EQF level 6). Education and training is clearly perceived as a way to improve one's opportunities in life. Learning, undertaking work experience and attaining qualifications were viewed as part of progressing and developing a career pathway. Claire (UK, 31) had future aspirations to become a social worker and had explored what was required in terms of experience and qualification. She also reflected on her suitability for such a role: 'What I'd really like to do is be a social worker. If I had the chance to do it now I would do it but I haven't got to the bit where I say right, that's it. I've looked into it loads of times on the internet […] I don't think I would get stressed knowing that I was doing the best I could do. It would be stress though if I walked away knowing that a child was going to be harmed as soon as my back was turned that sort of thing.'

Dan (UK, 25) was still working towards his future aspirations of joining the police force. He had been strategic in his learning choices and knew that the skills he had developed and his work experiences would support any future application to join the police: 'Police is still a desire, but retail has always been the easy option with money in my back pocket. I know that sounds terrible. It's just you get an option to make so you make it. In the future I still plan to go for it. I'm still in my 20s so I've got plenty of time. We'll see how this place goes first and then we'll see. I don't think I'll still be here in 27 years though, but you never know.'

Engagement in education and training also reflects the changing life situation of people, as in the case of Ellinor (DK, 28) who wants to quit the day care sector. She explains her search for an apprenticeship as a clerk as follows: 'I think I have become older, and I have two kids. It has a lot to do with spending seven and a half hours working with kids and then coming home to your own kids. You can hardly contain your own kids, honestly. Coming home, entertaining the kids, cooking, washing, bathing […]. It is tough.'

To Ellinor, the plans for her future are closely connected with becoming a mother and how this has changed her life. For others, future planning was around expanding or opening businesses. For instance, Alessia (IT, 34) manages her

own hairdressing salon after working in other salons for over 10 years. She is very ambitious, determined and sustained by a strong passion for her profession. Alessia learns by doing, so she is keen to raise the level of her experiential learning. She wants to build up her clientele and, in the near future, to open a new and bigger shop. She sees herself as an entrepreneur, even open to the risks normally connected with any entrepreneurial endeavour: 'I feel ready. The moment is not easy [because of the overall economic crisis] but if one is motivated and able to keep a good standard it is possible to emerge and progress.' In the second interview, Alessia declares she is making plans for opening a new and bigger shop in a near future.

Both Toke (DK, 40) and Beth (DK, 33) have an entrepreneurial outlook and perceive learning as a way to create a niche product/service in the market. Although, Beth is currently taking part in the hairdresser's programme, she has already drawn up a business plan: 'I have a company plan completely ready. I want to think in intelligent solutions. I know that businessmen have a hard time making time to get a haircut […] so we will make a team who will go to them. Like massage therapists.'

Others are considering opening up their own business and, although learning is underway, plans are still be developed and considered in terms of family responsibilities.

Within the Italian narratives, there were a number of individuals who had not developed future plans, but were open to the idea of learning in the future. For some, future planning was difficult due to their personal circumstances, lack of confidence and self-efficacy, as well as having a sense of hopelessness. For others, such as Norberto (IT, 30), who has always been in employment, considerations focus on private life. To establish a more comfortable life style he considers a second, 'under the table', job. Learning plays an important role in his life, for example taking English classes.

Rosina (IT, 27) and Gabriele (IT, 34) also have clear ideas about both their future and the role learning has to play in it. Rosina is determined to undertake as many updating/upskilling courses as she can afford to stabilise her position in an accountant's office. Gabriele is completely absorbed in the present. He is absolutely positive about the need to succeed in getting the diploma and stabilising his position. Momo (DE, 34) is also focused on the present and achieving his current qualification. However, Rosina, Gabriele and Momo's ideas about their future (especially Rosina) are aspirational and uncertain. On the one hand, these ideas underline a genuine opening to future learning engagements; on the other hand, they should be simply taken as projections towards a better

future, implying a stable job and the possibility of designing successful career paths also through continuous learning.

Other interviewees had no plans for future engagement with education or learning. For John (DK, 38) future opportunities are a matter of ability. He hopes to gain a foothold in the labour market by gaining experience through various jobs. Susanne (DK, 29) does not report on any future plans, but she has the opportunity to take the social and health care assistant programme through APEL. She has fears over the extra responsibility that the move from helper to assistant would entail. Some with unclear future plans hope learning will be a possibility in the future and have positive impact.

These narratives demonstrate that, for many low-skilled adults in this study, learning plays an important role in their life and career concepts and aspirations: more learning is closely connected to a better future. The drive for improvement in life and work conditions, including the desire for more stability, lead to plans for more education. However, some of the participants seemed unable at present to take more concrete steps towards their future. The narratives also demonstrate how a lack of concern about future orientation and career planning can demotivate learning. despite an openness or willingness to learn in the future. Even those with high career aspirations can fail to consider learning in the future.

4.5.2. Poor future outlook for work and learning

As well as lack of concern for the future, poor labour market opportunities can lead to feeling of helplessness and fatalism, where individuals perceive that there is no possibility to plan their career, because external circumstances control their destiny. The opportunistic career decision-making style seems to be dominant in the narratives of the low-skilled. Several interviewees have exploited available opportunities rather than make active choices about work; their career plans could seem vague, undecided and uncertain (Bimrose and Brown, 2013). In some cases, only exceptional and unforeseen external circumstances (such as loss of job or serious illness) can bring them to reflect on their career progression and they often consider that it is already too late. Karla (CZ, 39) has been working in her field since she left school. Although she knows her job is not guaranteed, she prefers not to think about it. Thinking about possible career instability is only generating anxiety and she does not know what alternatives there are to her current occupation and how she could anticipate the change: ‘It is better not to think about change and not to be bothered. We will see when it happens.’

Hopelessness and fatalism were also features of narratives of the low-skilled. Iva (CZ, 39) regrets her attitude to education during her school years; she

did not know that without a higher qualification she would have few opportunities to change a career later. Health problems prevent her from continuing to work as a professional cook. However, she is convinced that returning to formal education is impossible for her and she regrets not having planned her future better: 'At that time I didn't understand the importance of the baccalaureate, I didn't understand that one day I might need it, that it could be important. I thought I would just stay in the kitchen forever and any notion of a career development was completely unknown for me. I was not thinking about the future at all. I regret neglecting this at the time when I could still change something.'

At the time of the first interview, Ginevra (IT, 31) was rather optimistic about her future; during the second, she appeared discouraged and hopeless. While she still believes that aesthetics is a suitable field for her, the idea of becoming a self-employed beautician has lost its appeal. Her perspectives seem bleak and she is at risk of marginalisation.

Mirko (IT, 26) lives in a state of fatalism, reflecting an immature approach to life. He sees 'the job' as a sort of exogenous, statistical, factor that will manifest itself sooner or later. 'Perhaps I must find a job [...]. Perhaps a time will arrive when I'll have a real job [...]. Perhaps I have to find a way of making a living for myself, and even for the family that I would like to form [...] with a simple and honest woman. I don't like the kind of women that nowadays it is so easy to meet […]. It's a destiny that everybody finds his own job.'

He can only vaguely understand that developing competences through learning is a source of benefit for promotion opportunities. His mind is closed to anything else than a simplified idea of 'working'.

Omar (IT, 36) similarly feels only confusion and depression about his future. He is just able to sketch a vague, rather desperate, project of emigration. 'Maybe in the past I had some stimuli but now my ass felt down in the ground and I don't know which way I should rise up. My only hope is to be able to get some money somewhere and to leave, to go to South America, where my mother comes from. I also have relatives there, they could help me.'

For others, a life-changing event can impact and change future orientation to learning. Michal's (CZ, 38) attitude to career planning changed dramatically after he was diagnosed with cancer. He realised that life has a special value and that to enjoy life to the fullest; he has to take all the opportunities for his professional development.

Several interviewees noted that poor and uncertain labour markets negatively influenced their decision to return to education or participate in some form of learning. Those from rural and economically underdeveloped regions often expressed a fatalistic attitude about their current situation. In one sense, no

education can change their perspectives on the labour market. Other forces – external to themselves – control their destiny (external locus of control) as in the following two narratives. Alice (CZ, 33) comes from a rural region with few employment opportunities. She does not see any point in engaging in education, because the only way to find a job afterwards is leaving the region. This is, however, not possible due to her family obligations: 'Going back to school or to a university and getting a higher qualification would not be useful for me. I have no motivation to go there, because there is no work here in the sectors they prepare you for anyway.' 'Here (in my region), it's all fixed in advance: VET certificate, baccalaureate or university, you only get a minimum wage.'

Iva (CZ, 39) is convinced that engaging in learning will not change her situation, because her professional life is determined by the situation in the region and no education will change the fact that everyone earns a minimum wage: 'I know some people who went back to school and obtained the baccalaureate, but finally it was worthless for them. One of them works as an office cleaner, another one works in MacDonald's for 50 CZK/hour […]. Today people get jobs mostly because they have good connections, not because of their education […]. I have a friend and once I was complaining to her about earning minimum wage. And she said to me 'You know, I have a university degree, English certificate, and I still earn a minimum wage. And I'm lucky to have a job.' […] Here, everybody earns the minimum wage, no matter what their qualification level.'

In Italy, the economic recession has negatively impacted on one interviewee's future plans. Michele (IT, 41) is able to assess his skills and qualities in a realistic and objective way. He knows his weaknesses, but also his strengths. He considers his strength to be his long experience in 'learning by doing' and the ability to face new challenges. His high reliability and sense of duty make him a 'competitive' low-skilled worker, in a world where work ethic seems to be vanishing. Michele has built his identity in terms of reliability and practical knowledge. While in the first research interview for this study, he put forward ideas about new independent activities, during the second he seemed less optimistic. He now has vague plans of creating a business of his own in Spain or in the Italian Alpine regions, but he is reluctant to start due to the economic situation: 'At this point, they say, it is more convenient to be a dependent worker than an owner. But if and when the economic situation improves, I might consider this option seriously'.

These narratives highlight how local and national labour markets, and employment prospects, can negatively impact on an individual's motivation to learn. This change of disposition from high aspirations to scepticism or even

fatalism about the possibility of changing their situation shows that many participants struggled when confronted with workplace and labour market reality. External barriers related to uncertainty in the labour market in terms of skill needs, an economic recession that offers few opportunities, the value of degrees for some occupations and the declining value of some university degrees add to the confusion and, sometimes, resignation.

CHAPTER 5.

Discussion: key lessons learned

This section focuses upon the lessons learned from the study which could be used to inform policy and practice, especially in relation to the role of continuing education and training and other forms of skill development.

The narratives of the interviewees across seven countries showed both that individuals were often profoundly disadvantaged in the labour market where they lacked basic skills (though some individuals were very resourceful in developing their skills informally as they navigated their way through the labour market, while others made use of more formal education and training opportunities to develop their skills). High-quality initial education is clearly vital in terms of basic skill development, but where individuals do not reach expected levels the opportunities and incentives for them to continue to develop proficiency in a range of skills, whether outside work or at the workplace is important.

Continuing education and training needs to accomplish three tasks. First, it has to act as a pathway for continuing vocational development. Second it needs to promote actions aimed at supporting the skill development of those who performed less well in literacy and numeracy. Third, it needs to facilitate changes in career direction for those seeking to work in areas different from those in which they previously worked.

Career guidance is another potential structural form of support for career development. Possible ways how this could be achieved are elaborated in this chapter. However, career development also can be driven by individual agency and more informal ways of supporting individuals to become more agentic, which is also considered.

5.1. Continuing education and training initiatives

In this section several key factors in different continuing education and training initiatives will be outlined. These factors could be considered in the design of programmes of support for workers finding it difficult to establish themselves in development pathways leading to the prospect of sustainable employment which uses, develops and enhances their skills.

5.1.1. The value of specially designed education and training programmes for adults without skilled training or experience of skilled work

The example of Denmark illustrates how despite the availability of a fairly comprehensive CVET system, low-skilled workers were sometimes reluctant to engage with such programmes. The policy response is therefore instructive. The post-compulsory education and training system has an important role in the Danish flexicurity system and in recent years, questions related to activity and participation among the low-skilled has gained significant political importance (Trepartsudvalget, 2006, p. 18). Following the investigation on strengths and weaknesses in the Danish post-compulsory education and training system related to tripartite negotiations in 2006, political attention has been aimed at, for example, recognition of prior learning (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008) and focusing of the programmes to relevant target groups (Danish Ministry of Education, 2009).

In a recent proposal from the Danish government, a new vocational training programme for adults will be established. This vocational training for adults will be an educational opportunity for adults without skilled training or experiences. At the same time, the low-skilled with working-life experience should have their prior learning considered. An adult educational focus will be prioritised. The underlying basis will be that their experience and their education must be structured according to their prior learning (Regeringen, 2013, p.57 et seq.).

5.1.2. Programmes supporting basic skill development are valued by learners, but continuing support is often needed

In recent years, some structural changes have influenced the learning possibilities of the low-skilled. For example, in Denmark in 2001 the general programme ‘preparatory adult education’ (FVU) was introduced as a highly flexible option for the low-skilled with regards to both the level and planning of the courses to improve their basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Although participation in this programme is growing, the activity has not yet met the political goals. This slow progress mirrors to some extent the experience of the UK with their ‘skills for life’ programme. Large numbers of people were supported on the programme and the individual responses to the 30 hour programmes were fairly positive at an individual level, but without institutional arrangements for progression, progress often stalled. The programme was then deemed too expensive to continue. The lesson here would seem to be that thought needs to be given to continuing support as well as initial engagement as individuals may face relatively steep learning gradients in making substantive progress.

5.1.3. Importance of financial support

Economic factors are important for participation in adult education. In Denmark, there are different possibilities of government-subsidised financial support for companies and their workers participating in adult learning. These arrangements include 'job rotation', where the company will get a government financed temporary worker (unemployed), while the (low-skilled) worker participates in education. Further, learners can have governmental support while studying through, for example, *Voksenlærlingetilskud*, while participating in VET (SVU) when participating in general post-compulsory education, and *VEU-godtgørelse* while participating in vocational programmes.

In France, a system of paid individual training leave (CIF) exists. Provided the employee's pay rate is lower than double *the salaire minimum de croissance*' (SMIC) – that is, the minimum wage – then the individual receives his or her full salary. All training costs (course fees, transport and accommodation) are paid by the *Fonds de gestion des congés individuals de formation* (Fongecif), which is responsible for ensuring funding and governance of the CIF. An individual may take up to one year's full-time training or 1 200 hours of training delivered on a part-time basis. Where collective bargaining agreements are in place, these maxima can be increased. There are some conditions both for eligibility and repayment, as outlined in Chapter 2.

The funding for the CIF comes directly from employers, who are required by national mandate to contribute 0.2% of their total annual wage bill, except for micro-enterprises, that is organisations where the total head count is less than ten. For these micro enterprises, the State funds individual training directly.

5.1.4. Importance of educational infrastructure to support adult learning

The Danish Adult Education Centres (VUC) make up one example of the core institutional arrangements with regard to providing general education programmes for low-skilled persons. Participation in general adult education has changed in recent years. The traditional single subject structure is challenged because more and more people use VUC as full-time education. The participants are in general younger than before, and the growth in the amount of full-time participants is particularly significant among the 16 to 29 year-olds. One of the reasons for this trend is, that regulation concerning young people receiving social security has been tightened up and social security for young people is now combined with a prompt to participate in education (so-called *uddannelsespålæg*) (Damvad, 2013, p. 5). France has a number of networks of adult education centres as does England, although recent cuts have seen provision reduced. All countries offer vocational training provision in a variety of forms, with particular

programmes often being directed towards the unemployed aiming at their successful reintegration in the labour market. A major concern for these institutions is to develop programmes that meet the needs to their target population in relation to personal development and labour market orientation.

5.1.5. Importance of employee self-direction in support of adult learning

In France there is also a system of Employee self-directed continual vocational training articulated most clearly in the *droit individuel à la formation* (DIF) – an individual's right to training. The key vehicle for delivering the individual's right to training (the DIF) is the dedicated, individual training leave or *congéindividuel de formation* (CIF), first introduced in 1971. Since then, the entitlements have been reviewed, each time with the intention of extending access and broadening the reach of interventions within the scope of the funding regime. The year 1983 saw the creation of the bodies which are responsible for managing the CIF funds, namely *the Fonds de gestion des congés individuals de formation* (Fongecif). Paid leave for preparing the skills audit (*bilan de compétences*) was introduced in 1991. At the same time, the CIF was extended to employees coming to the end of their fixed term contracts. In 2002, paid leave was authorised for those wanting to validate their experiential learning through the *validation des aquis de l'expériences* (VAE) which is the formal process of accreditation. The 2009 developments included for the first time clear entitlement to individual career guidance with a professional; this provision to be offered over and above advice given by the public employment services (PES) through the *Pôleemploi*. From this point, attention was also paid to the transferability and portability of the individual training portfolio, across occupational sectors and/or geographical regions. Most recently, in January 2013, eligibility for the various forms of paid leave was extended again, notably to include employees under the age of 30. Under the aegis of DIF, the individual entitlement is 20 hours of paid leave for training in any given year. This entitlement may be rolled forward for a period of up to six years, making a total of 120 hours (Ministère du travail, 2014).

5.1.6. Importance of a skills audit in support of adult learning

The French system described above makes use of a skills audit (bilan de compétences) in assessing the skills of employees undertaking a skills review. The audit is particularly important for the low-skilled who lack formal qualifications. Skills audits expose skills gaps or deficits, thus helping the employer better manage their human resources (Ministère du travail, 2010).

Completing a bilan does not offer any entitlement to a recognised qualification, but it can lead to the *validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE); that is a formal accreditation of prior and experiential learning. Nevertheless, it

does bring to light and bring together an individual's professional competences whether developed through paid or unpaid work, formal or informal learning. The process of working on a personal skills audit can be, in and of itself a valuable process of reflection and recognition; both of what has been mastered but also where gaps in know-how need to be plugged for successful navigation of a difficult labour market. However, there is a caution in that as in our data not all of those who undertake a bilan find it of immediate benefit. An evaluation of skills coaching trials and skills passports in England (Hasluck et al., 2006) similarly found dissatisfaction among the low-skilled where training courses to address skills gaps were not immediately available in their locality.

5.1.7. Outreach work to support engagement of the low-skilled in education

Personal and social barriers in relation with job and family seem to explain the lack of incentive towards the upgrading of qualifications. Outreach work can take place in many different forms, such as including adults in different functions in communal activities or school activities as well as building a bridge to leaders who also participate in communal activities and function as role models and providers of ideas. In a Danish context, outreach work with the purpose of engaging low-skilled in education has been implemented to a great extent for the last 10 years. Experiences show that the way in which the participant is contacted is vital for successful engagement. A person closely associated with the low-skilled is regarded as trustworthy in connection with building up motivation. The French system has few training programmes organised at the national level, but at regional level there is a variety of provision aimed at re-engagement of the low-skilled. The English system did have some national initiatives in this area, but while short 'skills for life' provision had some success in re-engaging the low-skilled, the major problem was the lack of pathways which would allow progression into subsequent programmes offering substantive education and training provision.

5.1.8. Access to (semi-)skilled worker training for disadvantaged adults

Apprenticeship systems are effective forms of initial skill formation but shorter programmes of more limited (semi-)skilled worker training may give access to qualifications, work experience and employment opportunities that use an enhanced skill set for disadvantaged adults who enrol on these special programmes, as in Germany. Similar programmes are in place in France, Italy, Poland and the Czech Republic. The English system offered very large numbers of adult apprenticeships, but many of these were taken by employees already in work and amounted to little more than accreditation of prior achievement. Such

schemes could be tailored more to individuals in different situations so that they could support their labour market transitions, not just into employment, but also facilitating progression between different types of employment.

5.1.9. Identifying those most at risk due to poor skills proficiency

One interesting finding from the analysis of the narratives from the sample as a whole was the diversity of the population with low level qualifications and those without any formal qualifications at all. There could be many reasons why individuals did not achieve at school, and low levels of formal qualifications did not always equate to an underlying profile of poorly developed skills. Yet poorly developed skills are associated with a range of labour market and other problems, so it is important to identify those most at risk from poorly developed skills. The most disadvantaged adults need to be not only offered, but also encouraged, to improve their proficiency. This means identifying low-skilled adults in recruitment centres, career guidance centres, and at the workplace, who require support, including a range of provisions, such as language support as well as help with basic skills and emotional support. Learning support and learning opportunities need to be tailored to their needs. Such support is likely to require 'innovative approaches and significant community engagement' (OECD, 2013, p. 18).

5.1.10. Attempts to remove the stigma attached to individuals with low levels of education

Policies should also aim to remove the stigma sometimes attached to individuals with lower levels of education. This indeed was a heart-felt plea from some of the interviewees. The reasons why people do not achieve formal qualifications early in life are manifold and, in any case, from what we know of the brain it is remarkably plastic and that if individuals embrace a growth mind-set they can often achieve a great deal. What one achieved as a teenager should not define one's learning capability still less one's worth as a person. However, some interviewees felt stigmatised for the rest of their lives by their lack of initial school qualifications. Future research should examine this issue and see what measures could dampen this pernicious effect. Diversity training for teachers as well as the development of pedagogical tools to support diversity training among students would support awareness building and contribute to the change of attitudes or mindsets.

5.2. Career guidance for the relatively low qualified

5.2.1. Importance of career guidance in supporting adult career development

Low-skilled and low qualified employees often need to develop their skills further to find longer-term and more stable forms of employment. Career guidance can play an important role in helping them articulate both the types of skills and knowledge which they may wish to develop and the education, training or employment contexts in which such skills and knowledge may be developed (Cedefop, 2008b; 2011a; 2011b). In other cases, career guidance may help workers reflect upon the nature of their skill sets and whether switching between low-skilled work contexts could nevertheless support them in developing their adaptability or employability. It can also assist employees in low-skilled work change their perspective towards aspects of learning, training and working. This may help them become more reflexive in how they view opportunities, themselves and their support networks, and develop a new sense of direction or become more proactive in their own career development. Overall, career guidance can help workers in low-skilled employment consider the most effective ways they can deploy and develop their skills, knowledge and understanding through a range of employment, education and training contexts. However, not all participants in the research study who had access to career guidance found it helpful. Additionally, for some participants, it had connotations of testing (and therefore personal failure) that resonated with negative experiences of education. The quality and nature of career guidance services needs consideration. Well qualified professionals are needed to delivery services that are adequately resourced.

The experience of participants testifies to the gap in high-quality provision, while an increasingly strong evidence base indicates that, in the longer term, the investment is worthwhile in terms of more successful labour market transitions for a whole range of client/customer groups, including those with low skills and/or qualifications. The need for career-guidance service support that extends offers of high quality, consistent services tailored for different client/customer needs is emphasised by findings from this research.

Meeting the challenges of securing progression from low-skilled work and gaining access to appropriate career guidance support to facilitate career development continues to require a combination of individual action and appropriate structural support. As a consequence, messages should emphasise the immediate benefits of being a learner rather than where it leads – particularly if the opportunity structures available to an individual at that time are limited

(Roberts, 1997). The potential of career adaptability has also been argued for, enabling individuals to become self-sufficient by supporting themselves and enhancing high performance working (Bimrose et al., 2011). As career counselling can be pivotal at turning points in individuals' lives, it needs to accommodate the dual issues of resiliency and career adaptability (Bimrose et al. 2011; Hearne, 2012; Bimrose and Hearn, 2012).

5.2.2. The value of mid-life career reviews

Mid-life career reviews would be particularly valuable to the low-skilled because of the difficulties they may face entering or re-entering the labour market as mature adults.

5.2.3. Providing labour market information about the benefits associated with skills development

Labour market information should be more readily available in accessible forms showing the value of skill development for the low-skilled. This recommendation is in line with the OECD (2013) suggestion that it is important to 'show how adults can benefit from better skills'. More adults will be tempted to invest in education and training if the benefits of improving their skills are made apparent to them. For example, governments can provide better information about the economic benefits, including wages net of taxes, employment and productivity, and non-economic benefits, including self-esteem and increased social interaction, of adult learning' (OECD, 2013, p. 18). Efforts should go into the provision of free information that is up to date and easily accessible.

5.3. Supporting individuals in their own skill development across employment, training and educational contexts

5.3.1. Identity development – developing positive learner identities

Adult skilled worker development and similar programmes also engage with issues linked to identity development whereby individuals can rebuild their identities as effective learners and workers with enhanced skill sets. Individuals who perceive formal learning and school context in a negative way end up in an unhelpful cycle where negative mindsets, attitudes and learning performance feed one another. Individuals believing they have fixed (and limited) capabilities rather than a growth or developmental mindset prevent themselves from getting ahead. It is possible to break the cycle by changing mindsets in ways that can

lead to improvements in learning performance (Yeager and Walton, 2011), as well as through developing positive mindsets, where abilities are regarded as capable of development, rather than fixed. Individuals will be more effective learners if they use learning strategies which incorporate metacognition, self-regulated learning, time management, and goal setting (Farrington et al., 2012, p.39). Wojecki (2007) highlights how people when they develop confidence and succeed as learners in the workplace, can transform their view of themselves as learners.

5.3.2. Health problems as a contributory factor to poor skills development

Supporting skill development for the low-skilled needs to take cognisance of individual factors and health may be one such factor. Some of our interviewees' poor performance was at least partly attributable to health problems which affected their participation in education and training and limit their employment opportunities. Individuals coped differently and demonstrated varying levels of resilience and adaptability in managing adversity at various points in their career development. Institutional support is important because there is a risk of poor health and consequently psychological distress can have an effect on self-efficacy expectations and lead individuals to 'giving-up' on their education and career aspirations (Bimrose and Hearne, 2012). In such cases access to career counselling often in combination with psychological consultations are needed to strengthen individuals' sense of self-worth or more broadly self-efficacy beliefs.

5.3.3. Activation programmes for the low-skilled who are unemployed

Activation programmes for the low-skilled that are also unemployed are common throughout Europe. In countries such as Poland the situation of the low-skilled group on the labour market keeps deteriorating as compared to the medium-skilled and high-skilled groups, because the labour market cannot absorb all of these groups. Poland has responded through the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) by developing a comprehensive training and counselling framework aimed to improve vocational desirability and employability of such people. Addressed to the low-skilled workers, the project titled *Każdypracownik jest ważny – podnoszeniekompetencjipracowników o niskichkwalifikacjach* involves counselling and educational interventions adjusted to the low-skilled people's vocational needs and their specific competence deficits.

There are limits to the extent to which active labour market policy can help large numbers of low-skilled people find work, but action is needed to give people some prospect of labour market participation. In the Czech Republic there are support programmes for the low-skilled unemployed within the framework of the European Social Funds financed projects, often on a regional level. These often

target the demand side of the labour market (financial benefits to employers hiring low-skilled/long-term unemployed people), but can also include supply-oriented programmes (training modules on employability skills, individual counselling, career guidance, etc.).

The outcomes of activation programmes differ widely and it will be important for the providers to further develop their programmes. The pure provision of training for specific skills is not sufficient anymore. Adjustments to the changing needs of individuals and the labour market, the increasing flexibility of work and leisure/family life as well as the needs for psychological and career counselling need to be addressed accordingly.

5.3.4. Training support for the low-skilled currently in employment

The low-skilled can be at risk of unemployment over the medium to longer term even if they are currently in employment. Mostly low-skilled workers do not have access to career guidance while they are employed. The Czech Republic makes special provision for this group whereby the labour office can finance retraining programmes for employed workers with an insufficient level of skills. This is only applicable in regions with a rate of unemployment exceeding the national average by 50%. Projects financed by the ESF also promote the development of training in companies, mostly targeted at people with low levels of qualification.

5.3.5. The value of a competences approach in helping to differentiate the individual characteristics of the low-skilled

The low-skilled face significant labour market challenges but they are not an undifferentiated group. Competences can be seen as individual characteristics, causally linked to effective performance. As well as practical skills performance involved in work activities, the behavioural nature of competences means cognitive, emotional and social aspects will also always be present. From this viewpoint, the low-skilled may require different types of support linked to these different dimensions. For example, cognitive competence development could include both simple but fundamental activities such as memorising, calculating, etc. and more complex activities such as thinking in systemic terms, identifying recurrent patterns in sequences of data and events. The social competences are those that allow viable interactions and promote effective forms of social interaction and cooperation. The emotional competences, in their turn, strictly linked to the other two, are those, hinging on awareness of self and others, through which it is possible to choose appropriate reactions to different situations and to positively influence others when requested. Resilience can be seen as a crucial component of emotional competences, coming into play in difficult situations which require a kind of self-control based not only on accrued defences

but also on a creative relationship with the external conditions. To sum up, all educational programmes need to include the notion of career management skills in their curricula (Cedefop, 2011c).

5.3.6. The value of the formal accreditation of prior and/or experiential learning for the formally low-skilled

The formal accreditation of prior and/or experiential learning is highly developed in France, where the *validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE) comprises four stages. The preliminary stage is one of information and guidance, usually involving one-to-one interviews with qualified career guidance professionals. The second 'feasibility' stage is intended to weed out hopelessly unrealistic cases by weighing up the likely portfolio claim against a specific course or programme of study at a specific training or educational institution. The third stage of portfolio-building, while driven primarily by the individual concerned, should be accompanied by a career professional and also draw on advice and supervision from the validating institution which ensures that a realistic link to labour market needs is included. In the fourth and final stage, a jury is convened to examine the portfolio in support of the claim and to interview the candidate. This should lead to formal validation. Paid leave is available for employees who want to work towards VAE. Unemployed candidates would get financial support either from the public employment service *Pôleemploi* and/or their region.

5.3.7. The value of challenging work in supporting the development of the low-skilled

The interviewees' narratives often highlighted how the challenges associated with their work were instrumental in facilitating their skill development. It was also argued that the value of education would be seen through the challenges they encounter at work and their ability to cope with them. Baethge and Baethge-Kinsky (2004) show how 'self-regulation' or the 'competence to learn' of learners as well as 'participation' is supported by learning opportunities near the work or in the work context. The narratives indicate that learning-rich challenging work is exceptionally powerful as a vehicle for individual development, but access to such work is often limited to those who are already relatively highly qualified. It is, however, still possible for individuals to develop their skills particularly if they are willing to tackle a range of low-skilled work. However, they need to recognise that learning activities and related social practices can extend across a range of education, training and employment contexts, so learning needs to be seen as an activity which actively crosses boundaries.

CHAPTER 6.

Conclusion

This research study investigated how workers with few initial qualifications think about education, learning and development as their careers unfold. The interviewees were predominantly aged 25 to 40 and had experience of work, which was often but not always relatively low-skilled. The strategic learning and career narratives of 105 interviewees in seven countries were analysed to provide an in-depth understanding of how such workers used different forms of learning to build their careers. The report focuses on reasons explaining why some felt disengaged from continuous education and training. It also presents examples of workers with few initial qualifications who developed strategies to enhance their skills and build successful careers.

The main results that can be concluded from this report are summarised here. They refer to a complex understanding of the reasons for disengagement in learning among low-educated and low-skilled adults as well as to strategies for reengaging in learning, and policy needs to support this group.

(a) it became evident that low self-esteem, limited self-efficacy and low resilience result in little interest in further education while the opposite supports further learning;
(b) family and peers influence the above-mentioned variables. Additionally they may impact perceptions about the relevance of learning for future careers. Conversely, family and peers who are positive about learning can stimulate re-engagement and even support the learner throughout an educational programme;
(c) the school experience itself, especially in respect to teachers' teaching skills, their personality, the practicality of learned context for the actual work context, the flexibility of programmes to meet the needs of a partially working family with children affect perceptions about education and further learning and engagement. The teacher as a motivator or de-motivator to learn has often been talked about;
(d) many low-educated individuals may face a different cognitive development than the majority of their age group. They may need more time at stages in their life to achieve a certain level of education. Providing more flexibility to achieve educational targets early in life might enhance engagement in learning later on;

(e) education and training is an investment. It requires an initial effort for a reward in the future. For some individuals the expectation about an immediate outcome of their effort influences their choices about engagement (e.g. choosing short courses over long educational programmes). Engagement often depends on the perception about potential outcomes (finding a better job);
(f) the role of education for skills acquisition or further skills development is understood by many individuals and re-engagement in different forms of learning (informal, non-formal, formal) often takes place;
(g) career guidance and counselling services can play a crucial role in supporting decisions regarding further learning. It is very important that these services are facilitated not only by specialists in their institutions, but also within schools and communities. Career guidance needs to be easily accessible in different stages in one's life and in some cases targeted to individual needs;
(h) individuals with low education and mainly skills acquired via workplace learning are at risk of losing their employability in the labour market. For them the recognition of prior learning is particularly relevant and may protect them.

The study of low-educated and low-skilled adults across seven EU Member States has shown how diverse this group actually is in respect to education. A number of interviewees had clearly acquired a variety of skills over their life and also had re-engaged in education later on. It also became evident that the historical and political background within the countries and their economic development over the past 25 years (e.g. in Czech Republic and Poland) had an impact on perceptions about learning and engagement. In other countries where a variety of support measures are in place (e.g. Denmark, Germany, France, and the UK) these need to be critically examined in respect to their outcomes. For policy-makers, a focus on low-educated and low-skilled adults is particularly relevant in respect to employment, and differentiated policy measures to address their needs are required.

List of abbreviations

ADHD	attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
AMU	adult vocational training (Arbejdsmarkedsuddannelser) [DK]
CIF	individual training leave (*congéindividuel de formation)* [FR]
CVET	continuing vocational education and training
DIF	individual entitlement to training (*droit individuel à la formation)* [FR]
EQF	European qualifications framework
FOA	Federation of Public Employees
GCSE	general certificate of secondary education
GVU	basic vocational education (Grundlæggendevoksenuddannelse)[DK]
PIAAC	programme for the international assessment of adult competences
RPL	recognition of prior learning
VAE	validation of experience (*validation des acquis de l'expérience)* [FR]
VET	vocational education and training
VUC	Danish adults education centres

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Improving career prospects for the low-educated

The role of guidance and lifelong learning

This report draws both on literature review and an original collection of stories from biographical interviews of individuals in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Poland and the UK. The narrative accounts describe the wide variety of experiences with initial and further education. The analysis focuses on motivations for learning (or not) and the findings confirm that early negative experiences with schooling have a scarring effect inhibiting workers' willingness to re-engage in education later in life. Nevertheless, many low-educated adults command a variety of skills, which they have developed in the work context, while the interest of the low-educated in education and training may be rekindled by making learning instrumental to improvement in their work situation.

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