

Frontiers in Research on Non-formal Adult Education Participation & Policy Applications

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Participation in Non-Formal Education (NFE)

- NFE refers to **organised adult learning** that occurs outside the formal school system.
- The EU's benchmark for adult learning and education participation is largely based on NFE (accounting for approximately **92% of this benchmark**).
- The target for 2030 is a **60% participation rate** (EC, 2020).
- This translates to involving **50 million new learners** in NFE each year across the EU by 2030 (Draghi, 2024).
- In fact, this figure could rise to **70 million** if those categorised under "guided on-the-job training" are excluded from the count as proposed by the EC (Boeren & Kalenda, forthcoming 2025).
- **€65 billions spent.**



Two Worlds of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) Research



Policy-making driven agenda

- Large-scale quantitative assessments (AES, LFS, PIAAC)
- Scalability of findings → generalisation
- Lack of details
- Descriptive
- Economic tradition of thinking

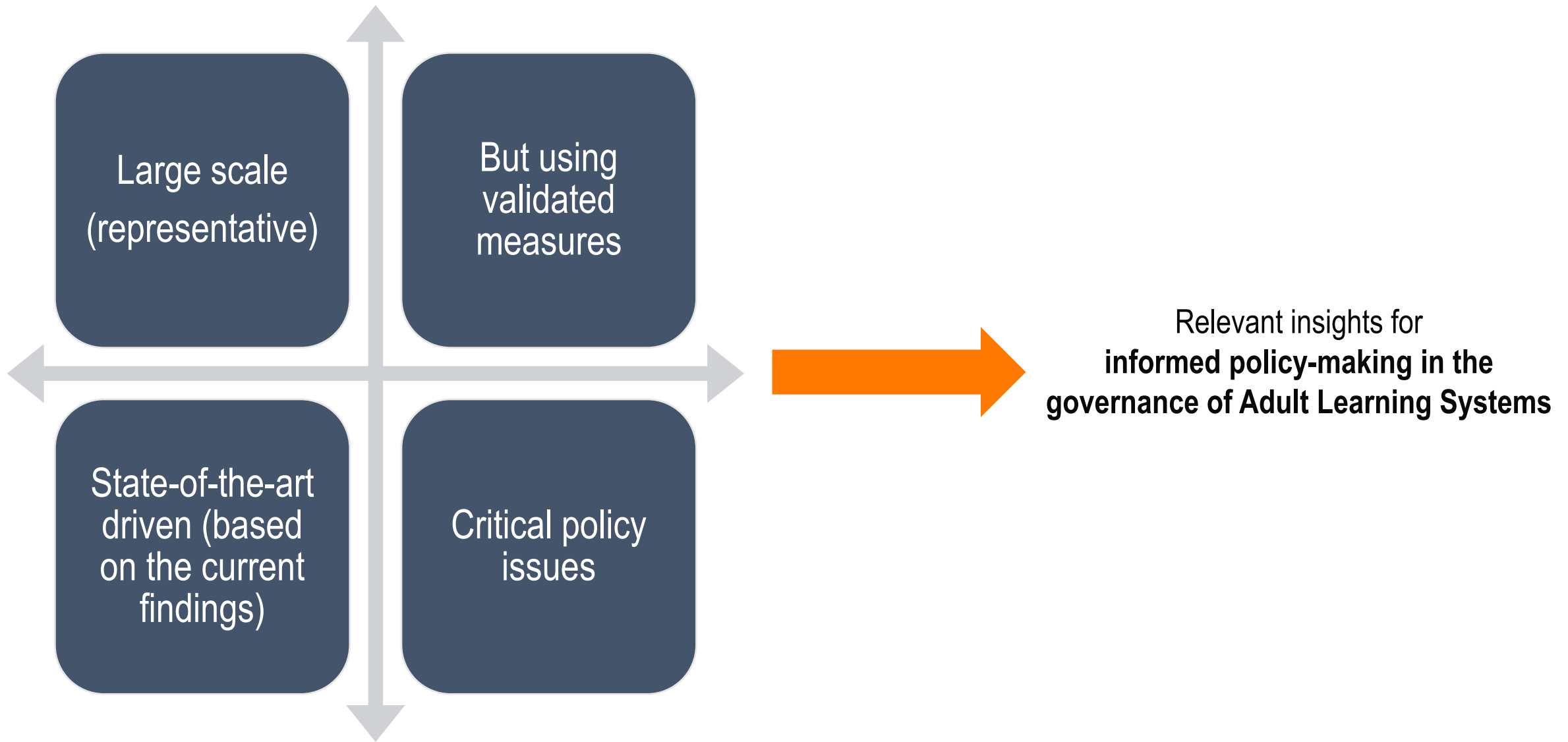


ALE field driven agenda

- Small-scale qualitative studies
- Without generalisation
- Lots of details
- Critical
- Humanistic tradition of thinking



A „third way“, or the best from both worlds (?)



The alliance of three research teams focused on development of Adult Learning Systems

Ellen Boeren (UoG)

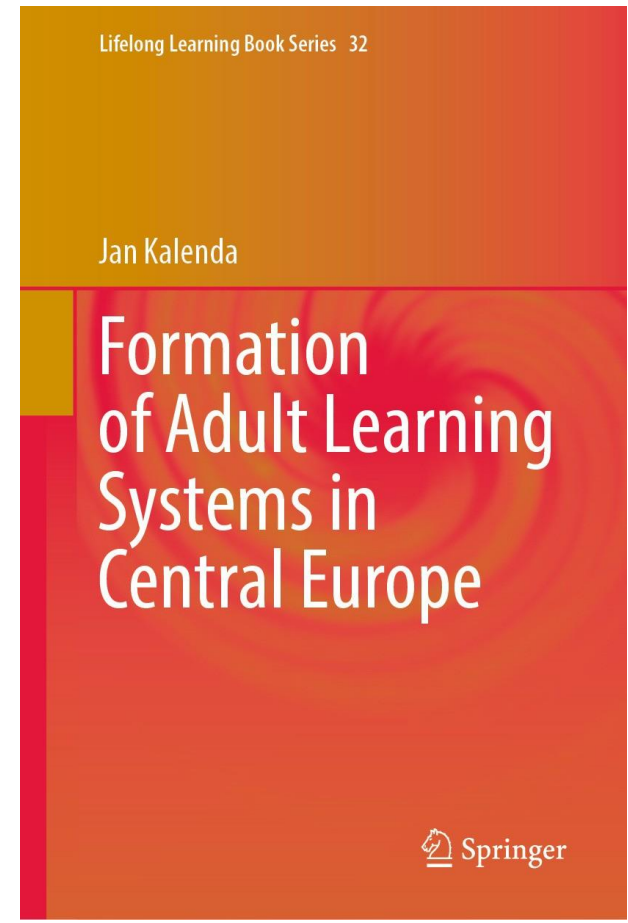
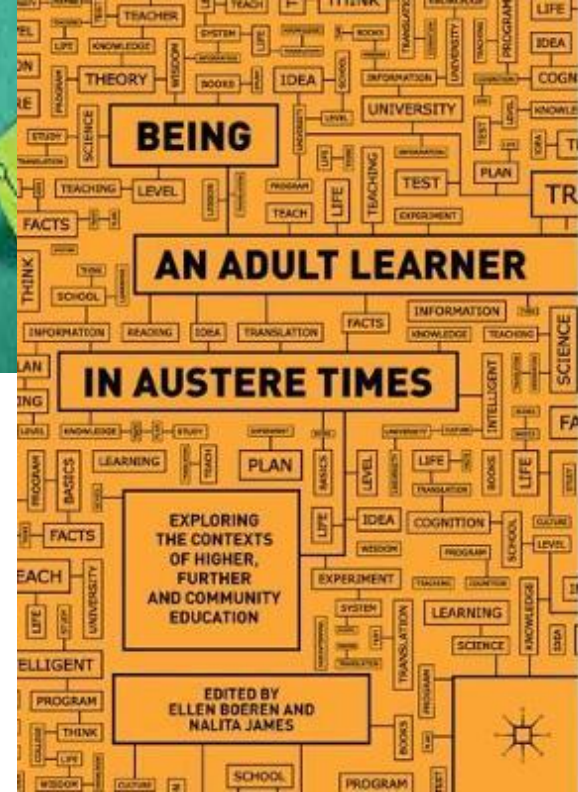
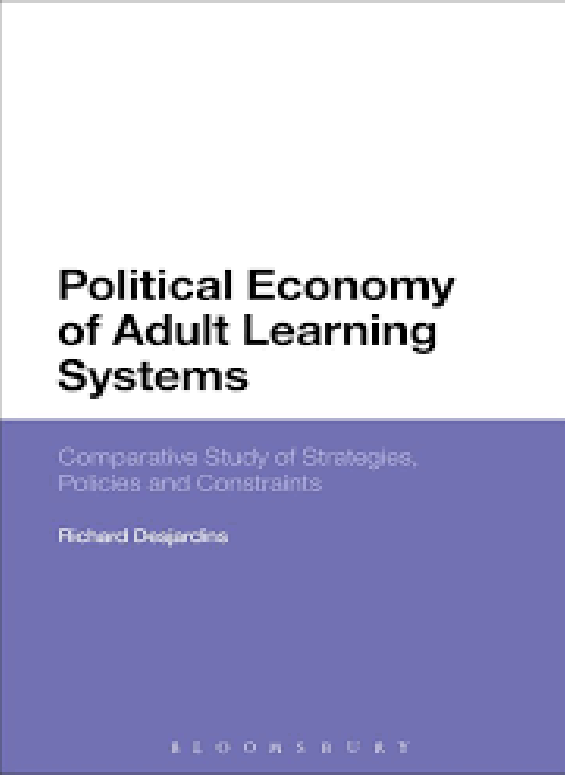
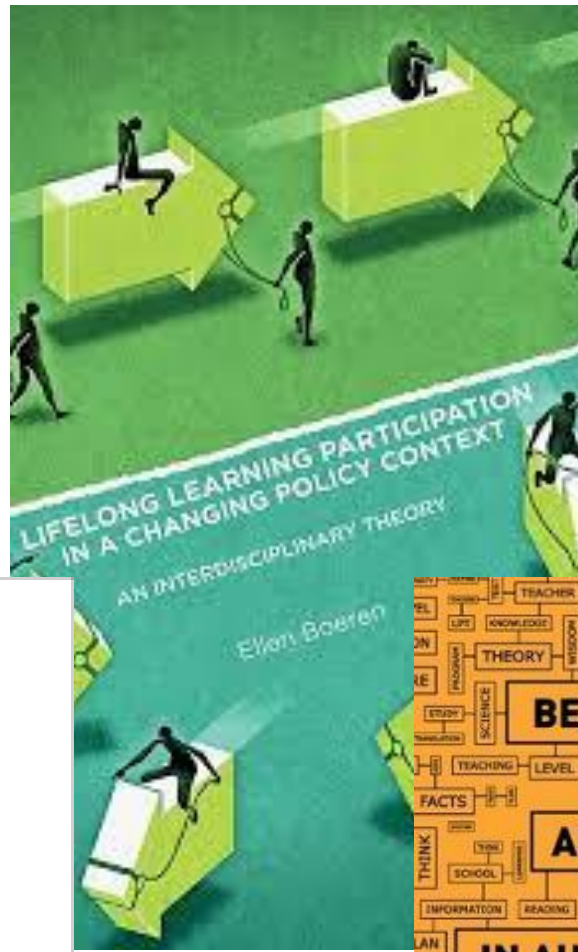


Richard Desjardins (UCLA)

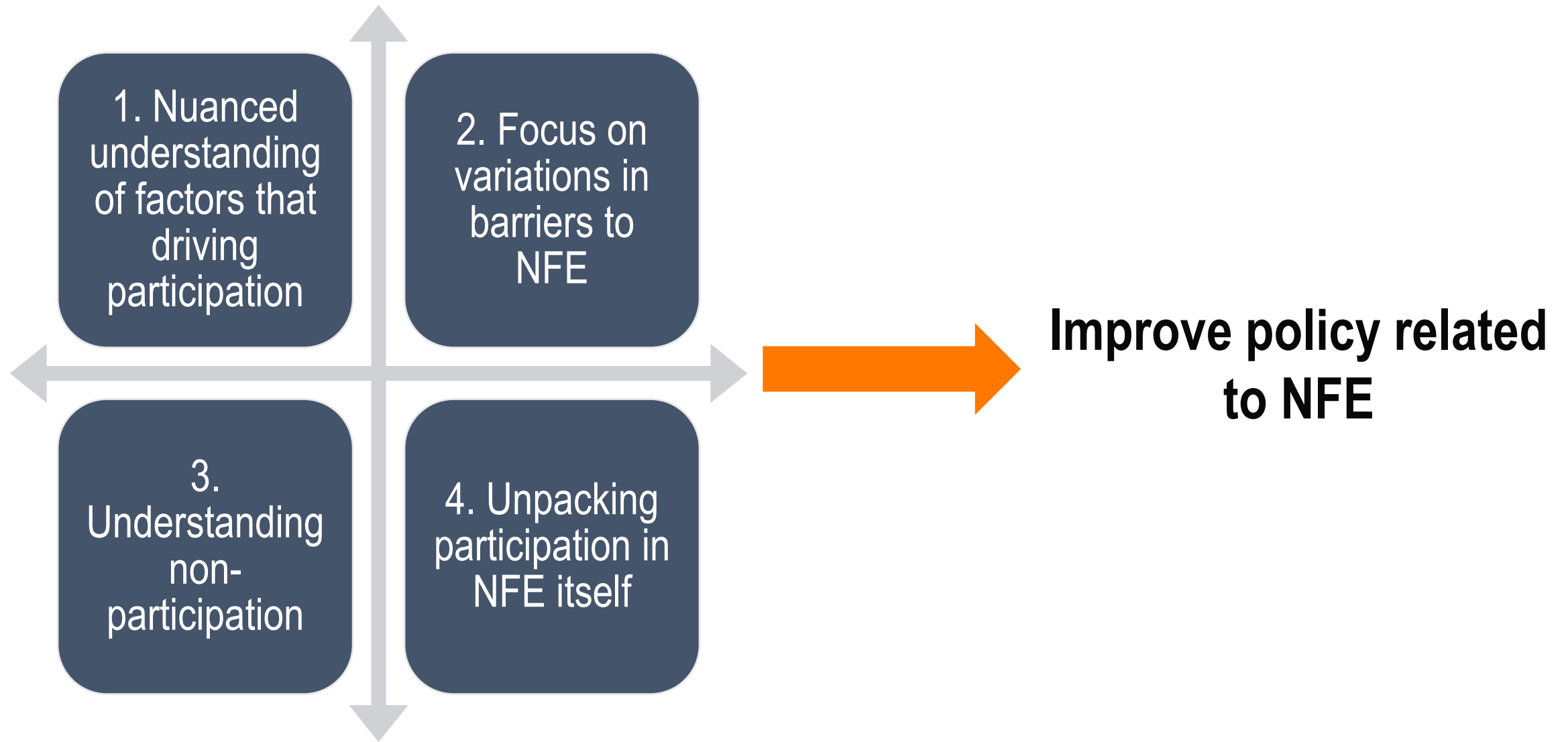


Jan Kalenda (TBU)





4 case studies related to NFE to demonstrate this approach



1. Case study

The Issue:

- According to the AES 2022 and PIAAC 2022 data, **gender inequality in ALE participation does not favour men.**
- In fact, when it comes to **formal** adult education, **women hold a distinct advantage.**

BUT,...

What data and analysis reveal is...

	Employer-sponsored NFE (by cost)					
	women (M3)			men (M4)		
	level 1	level 2	level 3	level 1	level 2	level 3
	Exp(B)					
<i>Micro-level variables</i>						
Age (ref. 25–44 years)	1.037	1.113	1.109	1.112	1.128	1.206
Education (ref. ISCED 3c or lower)						
ISCED 3ab-4	1.003	0.981	0.888	1.053	1.033	1.006
ISCED 5-8	0.881	0.826	0.804	0.843	0.850	0.946
Economic status (ref. active)	0.259**	0.323**	0.318**	0.144**	0.158**	0.153**
Employment status (Ref. 1 FTE)						
0.5 FTE	0.567**	0.634**	0.660**	0.428**	0.493**	0.476**
Employment contract (ref. Permanent)						
Temporary employment contract	0.975	10.012	0.979	0.881	0.919	1.013
No contract or work as subcontractors	0.296**	0.331**	0.321**	0.365**	0.392**	0.455**
Occupational status (ref. ISCO 1–2)						
ISCO 3–7	0.987	0.973	0.891	1.087	1.107	1.118
ISCO 8–9	0.805	0.762	0.769	0.703	0.709	0.708
<i>Meso-level variables</i>						
Size of res. location (ref. up to 999)						
1.000–19.999 inhabitants		1.371	1.355		0.973	1.008
20.000–99.999 inhabitants		1.440	1.372		0.641	0.650
100.000 or more inhabitants		1.127	1.116		0.714	0.763
Company size (ref. less than 50)						
50–250 employees		2.109**	2.072**		1.482	1.451
More than 250 employees		2.029**	1.997**		1.614*	1.730*
<i>Macro-level variables</i>						
Country (ref. Czech Republic)						
United Kingdom			1.017			0.760
Germany			1.720*			1.150
Sweden			1.010			0.538*

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

Source: Kalenda et al. (2024), Vaculíková et al. (2021)

Women participate in ALE at similar rates overall.

However, they are less likely to engage in job-oriented NFE and employer-sponsored NFE.

Women are particularly disadvantaged if they:

- are not active in the labour market,
- work part-time,
- are employed by companies with fewer than 50 employees.

Policy Lesson I.

Although some social groups have similar overall chances of participation, they may be disadvantaged when it comes to accessing the most impactful type of NFE.

1. Targeted Legislation for Women Outside the Labour Market:

- Implement training vouchers and counselling services specifically designed to support women who are not currently active in the labour market.

2. Legislation Supporting Women with Part-Time Jobs:

- Introduce both hard and soft measures, including a minimum number of training hours required within job contracts and tax incentives for employers who invest in training part-time female employees.

3. Support Measures for Women in SMEs:

- Offer tax benefits to SMEs that provide a minimum amount of training for female employees in this sector.

2. Case study

The Issue:

- One of the main reasons for the low participation rates in NFE is that many adults **encounter significant barriers to engagement** (Boeren, 2016; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009).
- Those with **lower levels of education** and **socioeconomic status** are more likely to face these obstacles.
- Therefore, **target policies should specifically focus to these two groups.**

BUT,...

What the data analysis reveal is...

Scale: 1-6, the higher number, the higher perception of barriers

Barriers for nonparticipants among low-educated adults		I. Cluster	II. Cluster	III. Cluster
		'Not interested'	'Potential learners'	'Facing mild barriers'
		(47 %)	(20 %)	(33 %)
Dispositional	Needs	4.48	2.01	3.50
	Worries	3.73	1.84	3.54
Institutional	Offer	3.90	2.47	3.25
Situational	Work	5.37	3.65	3.42
	Time	3.91	2.74	3.34
Overall score		4.64	3.20	3.38

Policy Lesson II.

Adults from the same target group often face different types of barriers. If we aim to develop tailored policies, they must take into account the variations within these groups.

1. Cluster (47%): „Not Interested“

- Policy **must go beyond fix supply of NFE**. There must be a transfer of benefits from training to life – broader opportunity structures.
- Higher involvement of the unions, NGOs, sectorial association and the state in the case of initiation of training and job creation/trasformation – building motivation for participation.

2. Cluster (20%): „Potential Learners“

- Create more **opportunities (supply) for training** within the work.
- Included a financial support of such a programmes for older adults, and those from SMEs.

3. Cluster (33%): „Mild barriers and worry about learning“

- **Enhancing counselling services** focused on the long-term development of skills for young men in manufacturing, specifically aligned with their career trajectories.

3. Case study

The Issue:

- Across EU there is a high number of those who **did not participate and are not willing to participate.**
 - For EU 42%
 - Sweeden 17%
 - **Poland 69%**

BUT, we know almost nothing about their reasons/attitudes?

What the data and analysis reveal is...

Table 2. Average score for attitudes in all clusters.

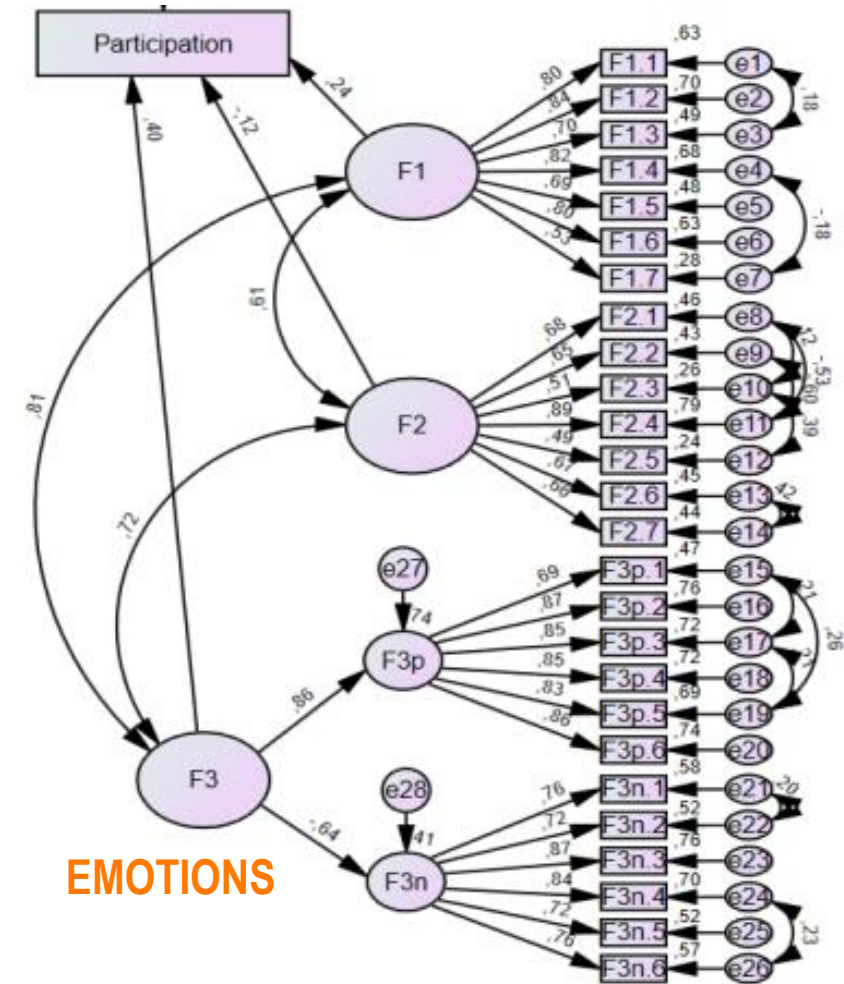
Factor	Label	Cluster			
		"Positive attitudes" (n = 370) M	"Personal obligations" (n = 362) M	"Public value" (n = 244) M	"Negative attitudes" (n = 224) M
F1	Personal attitudes	4.43	2.61	3.81	1.76
F2	Public meaning	4.78	3.54	4.24	3.25
F3p	Emotional associations (positive)	5.14	3.65	4.18	2.73
F3n	Emotional associations (negative)	1.67	2.58	3.59	4.42

M = Mean.

Table 3. Sociodemographic characteristic of the clusters.

		Cluster							
		"Positive attitudes" (n = 370)		"Personal obligations" (n = 362)		"Public value" (n = 244)		"Negative attitudes" (n = 224)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender	Male	169	45.7	181	50.0	114	46.7	134	59.8
	Female	201	54.3	181	50.0	130	53.3	90	40.2
Age	25–34	119	32.2	53	14.6	74	30.3	40	17.9
	35–44	95	25.7	90	24.9	57	23.4	47	21.0
	45–54	72	19.5	84	23.2	46	18.9	45	20.1
	55–64	64	17.3	92	25.4	53	21.7	62	27.7
	65–69	20	5.4	43	11.9	14	5.7	30	13.4
Education	ISCED 2 or lower	20	5.4	25	6.9	25	10.2	64	28.6
	ISCED 3c	92	24.9	151	41.7	99	40.6	118	52.7
	ISCED 3ab	150	40.5	139	38.4	90	36.9	36	16.1
	ISCED 5–8	108	29.2	47	13.0	30	12.3	6	2.7
Participation in ALE	yes	225	60.8	67	18.5	85	34.8	15	6.7
	no	145	39.2	295	81.5	159	65.2	209	93.3

(Kalenda et al., 2023a)



EMOTIONS

Figure 1. Visualisation of SEM (n = 1,200)

(Kalenda et al., 2023b)

Policy Lesson III.

The adult population displays highly varied attitudes to NFE. A key factor is the emotional association related to learning, particularly stemming from experiences in initial schooling.

- Knowles's (1971) andragogical principles remain relevant:

Cluster „personal obligations“ (31%)

- Treating adults as adults, demonstrating the relevance of learning
- Social policies that solve part of their obligations.

Cluster „negative attitudes“ (23%)

- Building positive emotional associations with learning early in their educational journey.

4. Case Study

The Issue:

- We know that more than 45% of Europeans participate in NFE each year.
- **However**, the effectiveness of this participation has been called into question (Draghi, 2024).

Instead of binary measurement we developed seven dimensional model of participation

Dimension	Description	Specified for AET participation
1. Educative dividend	Learning something valuable, esp. learning how to participate effectively	Participants learned how to participate in educational events in a way that brings them desirable outcomes
2. Goals and tasks	Participants not only undertake tasks but help set goals	In the experience of the participant, educational events provide opportunity for setting their learning goals, forms of learning, or content of learning
3. Resource control	Participants get to control (own or use) resources, not merely produce them	Participants retain control over how they use the acquired knowledge and skills
4. Exit	Capacity to leave without penalty and with resources	Participants take part in educational events on a voluntary basis
5. Voice	Opportunities to 'speak back' in order to influence outcomes	Participants are able to co-determine which educational events they will attend and under what conditions
6. Visible metrics	Empirical demonstrations of the connection between participation and outcomes	Participants are able to showcase tangible results of their learning
7. Affective capacity	Collective effervescence and the experience of being part of an audience	Participants feel connected to others attending the educational event

(Karger et al., 2025; forthcoming)

What the data and analysis reveal is...

Dimension	Specification for AET	High engagement group (53%)	Low engagement group (47%)
1. Educative dividend	Participants learned how to participate in educational events in a way that brings them desirable outcomes	High	Low
2. Goals and tasks	In the experience of the participant, educational events provide opportunity for setting their learning goals, forms of learning, or content of learning	Mid	Low
3. Resource control	Participants retain control over how they use the acquired knowledge and skills	High	Low
4. Exit	Participants take part in educational events on a voluntary basis	High	Low
5. Voice	Participants are able to co-determine which educational events they will attend and under what conditions	High	Low
6. Visible metrics	Participants are able to showcase tangible results of their learning	High	Low
7. Affective capacity	Participants feel connected to others attending the educational event	Mid	Mid

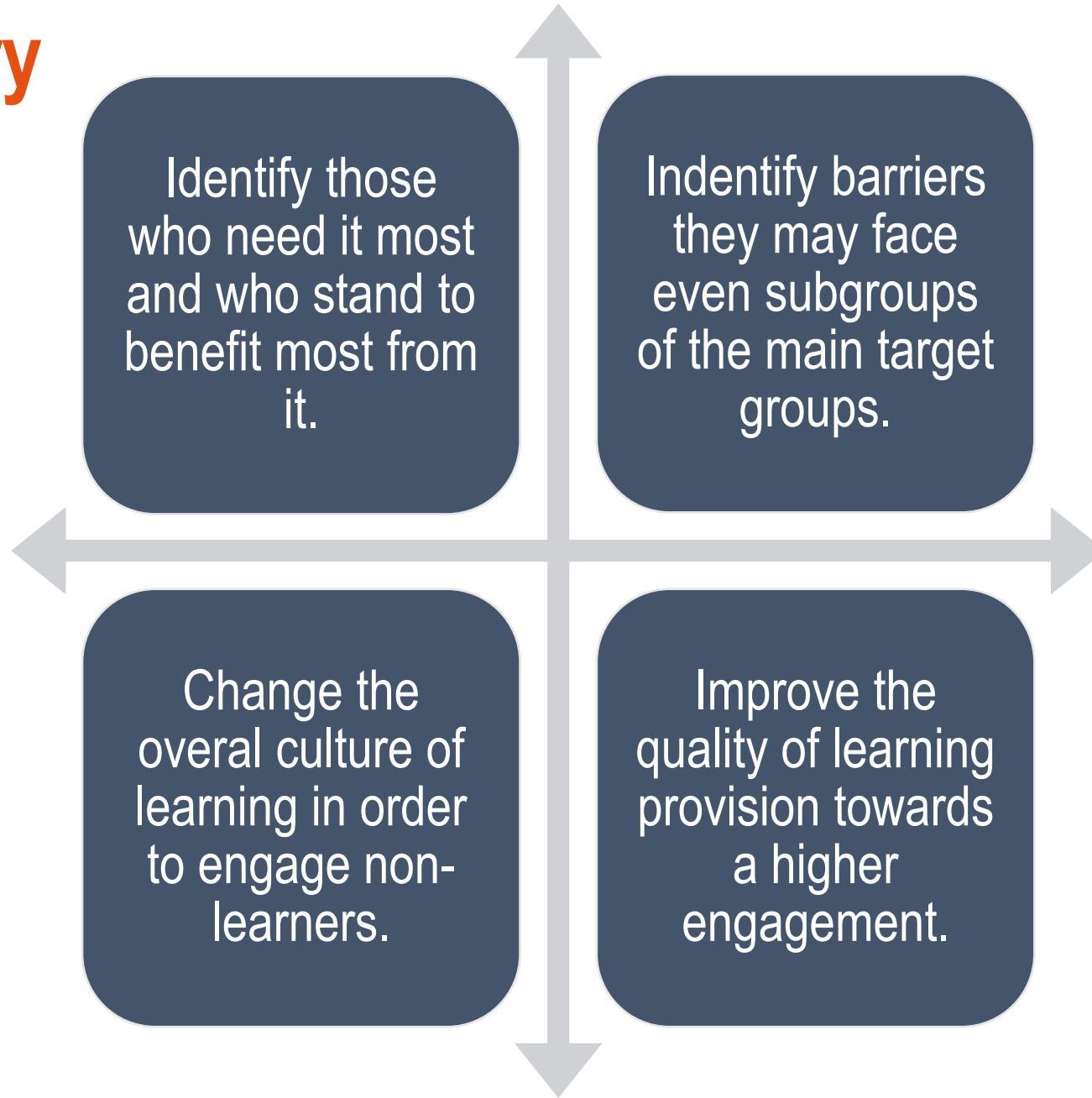
(Karget et al., 2025; forthcoming)

Policy Lesson IV.

Not only do the provision and access to training matter, but so does the quality of the training itself.

- Half of the participants (low ISCED, low SES) belong to a low engagement group, making the outcomes of their learning questionable.
- **Policy Goal:**
- Develop curricula and training programmes that effectively engage learners across the key dimensions of participation and accredit/evaluate them accordingly.

Summary



Thank you for your attention!

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