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# Drivers of learning for the low skilled

Running heads:

*International Journal of Lifelong Education*

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## Abstract

The drivers of learning for mid-career workers with few initial qualifications from the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy and Poland are examined. The focus in this article is upon the learning pathways and experience of the low-qualified drawn from empirical research which gathered and analysed the strategic career and learning biographies of 105 low-skilled individuals, mainly aged between 25 and 40, in the 7 countries, using semi-structured narrative interviews. The five drivers for learning evident in the interviews were enhancing self-efficacy; self-improvement; labour market-orientated learning; significant others motivating learning; and work-related practical learning. The interviewees were divided between those who wanted tangible and immediate learning outcomes and those who saw learning primarily as a means of self-improvement. Some interviewees with negative experiences of initial education were motivated to re-engage by a positive experience with continuing education, encouragement of significant others or through an experience of mastery of challenges at work which led to an increase in their self-efficacy. For the majority of interviewees, practical learning was particularly appreciated, whether undertaken to secure or enhance their current labour market position or undertaken to increase their self-efficacy.

## Keywords

Low skilled  
career narratives  
learning biographies  
career development  
identity development

## Introduction

**AQ 2** The low skilled are particularly vulnerable to labour market change, which can be unpredictable and risky (Edwards, 1997). Learning, both planned and unplanned, inside and outside the workplace, has become a key mechanism and process in the transition to and between jobs. The low skilled may find such transitions particularly challenging, but they may respond with their own forms of transitional learning (Glastra, Hake, & Schedler, 2004). Field (2000) notes that education in adult life is a resource on which individuals can draw to improve their employability and mobility, but it is also a cause of further uncertainty and risk, particularly for those who may have left initial education and training with few qualifications.

This article draws upon narrative interviews undertaken in 2013 and 2014 that investigated how individuals who leave initial education and training with few formal qualifications (defined as low skilled) could be supported in their learning activities, career development, employability and career transitions. The study was undertaken by an inter-disciplinary research team examining the strategic career biographies of low-skilled workers in seven European countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy and Poland). The overall aim of the study, which was funded by CEDEFOP, was to provide an in-depth understanding of the reasons why some low-skilled workers can be disengaged from education and learning throughout their life, whilst others are able to develop their skills to build successful careers. The countries were chosen to provide a range of different education, training and employment contexts (CEDEFOP, 2016).

The findings in relation to guidance and lifelong learning are reported by CEDEFOP (2016) and some key thematic issues are reported in other articles in this special issue. This article, however, represents an attempt to look at the results from across the seven countries to see if some common drivers for learning could be identified from the strategic career biographies of the low skilled in their attempts at career development.

## Literature review on drivers of learning for those in low-skilled employment

One component of the literature review of the overarching study (CEDEFOP, 2016) focused upon the drivers of learning

for those in low-skilled employment and this has informed the analysis reported here. The OECD skills survey (2013) identified the trap of low-skilled, low-paid employment leading to limited access to further education and training and the ways in which participation in learning activities may bring about important labour market and social outcomes. The study also highlighted how 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 more often participated out of obligation. It also emphasised the link between motivation for self-improvement and participation in adult learning (OECD, 2013). Motivation (Illeris, 2010) and a positive mind-set (Dweck, 2006) could also be important in whether the low skilled engaged in learning and development. These studies pointed to the importance of examining the role of individual factors in driving learning for the low skilled.

One way in which people in low skilled work throughout Europe upgrade their skills, knowledge and understanding is by taking on new roles when they change jobs (Brynin & Longhi, 2007). That is, the new work is either more challenging in itself and/or it offers an opportunity to develop new patterns of interaction and relationships, thereby developing individuals' abilities to make successful transitions. 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 & Parsons, 1997), so supporting progression from low-skilled work through engagement with learning and development is an important challenge. There are many ways to develop work-related skills, knowledge and understanding in employment, training and education contexts. For many people, work at different times in their life offers an important route to substantive skill development through engagement with challenging work (Brown, 2009). Apparently, low-skilled work can still offer opportunities for substantive learning and development (Brown, 2009). For example, 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, Fuller, Jewson, & Unwin, 2009).

Work-related training can be an important means of up-skilling 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 do 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). The OECD skills survey (2013) showed how for the low skilled participation in learning activities could bring about important labour market outcomes. At the same time, adult learning itself was taking a 'turn' towards the labour market. Rubenson (2004) examined the extent to which there was a movement in adult learning towards the development of a highly individualised commitment to learn, to develop and to change according to the changing needs of the labour market. Labour market-orientated learning can be viewed as helping individuals integrate and progress in the labour market. This group of studies emphasise the importance of work-related contextual factors associated with access to challenging work and/or training as a second set of factors driving learning for the low skilled.

Ivanic, Edwards, Satchwell, and Smith (2007) expanded upon how learning activities and related social practices can extend across a range of education, training and employment contexts in ways that help individuals build stronger learning identities, and in this sense learning may be seen as a boundary-crossing activity rather than being linked to a single context. Wojecki (2007) was interested in how people develop confidence and succeed as learners in the workplace. It was suggested that by engaging in education and learning directly related to their current employment, workers can transform their view of themselves as learners. By developing work-related skills, knowledge and understanding, and through strengthening of an individual's learning identity, a worker can establish a platform of confidence and competence from which it is possible to progress from low-skilled work. It may seem curious that a form of learning is a driver of learning, but it should be remembered that for some of the low skilled other forms of learning had negative associations. The lack of engagement with some forms of school learning could mean that the practical focus of later learning was itself a driver for engagement with learning. These studies suggest that forms of learning different from those associated with often modest achievements in compulsory education **act** as a third set of drivers which help the low skilled to transform their view of themselves as learners.

Work by Brown (2005, 2012) and Eraut (2004) highlighted a fourth set of factors related to the importance of support of others to the development of effective learning at the workplace. These four sets of factors relating to the individual; the work-related context; nature of work-related learning; and relationships with others could also be linked to a dynamic model of occupational identity formation (Brown, 1997). This model allowed for change and development over time; has a strong social dimension, whereby an individual learns, works and interacts with others; allows the individual to be a significant actor in the construction of her or his own occupational identity. Overall, the model provided a conceptual underpinning to the research and the literature outlined above provided a strong steer to examine more fully whether the four sets of factors could throw light upon why some workers remained relatively disengaged from education and learning for the first two decades or so of work, whilst others were able to develop their skills to build relatively successful careers.

## Methodology

A narrative interview method was adopted for the CERFOP funded 'Narratives of learning of the low skilled' (NLS)

A narrative interview method was adopted for the CEDEROP funded 'Narratives of Learning of the Low-Skilled' (NLLS) project. The narratives focused on key issues in the strategic career and learning biographies of the target population (Brown, 2004; Brown et al., 2010). A strategic learning biography tracks substantive changes in values, attitudes, behaviour and/or understanding, rather than just the non-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; and from interactions with all kinds of people (teachers, trainers, mentors, colleagues, peers and friends).

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on understanding individual career and learning experiences that linked to past, present and possible future career, learning and labour market experiences. Interviews were informal lasting up to 2 hours. Fifteen interviews were undertaken in each of the seven countries with workers who left initial education and training with few qualifications. Of the 105 interviewees, 57 were interviewed again (eight in each country, apart from nine in Italy) about one year after their initial interview. These follow-ups focused on changes over the last year, as well as providing an opportunity for further reflection and exploration of key experiences and transitions. The seven countries were chosen to provide a range of different education, training and employment contexts. The Czech Republic and Poland represented countries where the historical and political background and economic development over the past 25 years were expected to have had an impact on career development and perceptions about learning and engagement. Denmark represented a country with a well-developed continuing vocational education and training system, while Germany had well-developed initial vocational pathways. France had distinctive guidance support services, while England had a strong tradition of learning while working. Finally, Italy was representative of those countries where individuals largely had to make their way with relatively little systematic support for their career development.

Purposive and snowball sampling were adopted by the research teams to ensure that the participants met the following criteria: were aged 25–40 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 had very different experiences of how easy or difficult it was to enter the labour market before and after the crisis of 2008); 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 the 'informal' labour market.

## Data analysis

The data analysis was an iterative process whereby transcripts were read, re-read and coded. The narrative approach provided rich data that was analysed in-depth to generate detailed descriptions of the different types of pathways into, and potentially out of, low skilled employment. The narratives were also explored and analysed in terms of: subjective and objective barriers and drivers of learning; the impact of learning and learning experiences on future trajectories and aspirations; perceptions on skills and competences and their usefulness to the labour market; and attempts to build resilience and adaptability. In this article, the focus is mainly upon the answers interviewees gave when asked about the drivers of their learning.

An initial attempt was made to relate the answers given by the interviewees to the four sets of factors identified in the literature review. This process worked well for three of the four sets of drivers of learning. The labour market contextual factors in this context were primarily identified as 'labour market oriented learning'. The most common different form of learning to compulsory education could be highlighted as 'work related practical learning' and the importance of support of others to the development of effective learning at the workplace was organised around 'significant others motivating learning'. However, individual factors influencing the drivers of learning was a very large theme and it was decided to re-examine the literature to see if it made sense to sub-divide this category. The two sub-categories identified related to developing confidence and a more general motivation for personal development.

The decision to split the individual factors category could be justified for two reasons. First, for those with few qualifications, learning is often seen as a process of building confidence and self-efficacy. Increasing self-efficacy could be grounded in relative success in either or both working and learning after leaving school. A particular sense of personal agency could be underpinned by more general beliefs, such as self-efficacy and self-belief, with Bandura (2001) emphasising the value of 'efficacy belief', where an individual feels he or she can exercise a degree of control over their activities and environment. Second, for low-skilled workers their aspirations regarding adult education show that personal development is important (Larson & Milana, 2006). The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study (OECD, 2013) highlighted the correlation between motivation for self-improvement and the participation in adult learning. For instance, people who are interested in developing their skills usually participate in some kind of training or learning activities. Overall, the initial data analysis, informed by the four sets of factors identified in the literature review, identified five key drivers of learning which are examined in the report of the findings below.

## Findings on drivers of learning for the low skilled

### Enhancing self-efficacy

Seventeen of the 105 interviewees in the NLLS study recounted how once they developed greater confidence in their

own abilities through success at work and/or in learning they were able to engage more fully in formal learning, and in doing so overcome any negative experiences of compulsory education. These themes were also displayed to a lesser extent in many other learning and work narratives.

The career and learning biographies of this set of interviewees showed how an experience of success and increased self-efficacy could lead, in turn, to a higher willingness to participate in education and training activities and help raise educational aspirations. For example, Soňa (Czech interviewee) was initially a student lacking in motivation who achieved mediocre results at school, dropped out of a vocational course and who assumed she would work in the family restaurant. However, when she did enrol on another vocational programme later in life her results improved and she considered whether she should continue even further with her education:

I was happy to go to [vocational] 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 vocational school I thought that perhaps it was not such a bad idea. CZ, female, 32 years

Enhanced self-efficacy through a positive learning experience also acted as a driver for further learning for Jeanette (Danish interviewee, female, 33). After dropping out of two post compulsory education programmes and working 10 years as an unskilled store worker, she entered education as a social and health care helper, and for the first time in her life, she succeeded and achieved good grades. She was very passionate about it and explained that at that point in life she started believing in herself. She felt that had learned about herself, built her self-confidence and valued the acknowledgement and feedback she received from her supervisors, teachers and clients. Her success opened her eyes to considering further education, possibly as a kindergarten teacher.

Beth (Danish interviewee, female, 33) wanted to follow the family tradition of being self-employed, although she did not want to enter the family business. Beth did not do well in school, but success at work meant she increased her self-confidence and she was willing to undertake further learning. She built her competences by enrolling on private courses which enabled her to set up her own successful businesses as a makeup artist and yoga instructor.

Henrik (DK, male, 38) had been working for seven years as an unskilled caretaker at a home for children with special needs. He did a good job and as his confidence grew, he participated in an adult education programme and this further motivated him to try to achieve skilled worker status and start a new career. His manager encouraged Henrik to start his education as an assistant care worker. While studying, Henrik's attitude to learning changed and he immersed himself in individual assignments of his own choice. In one assignment, he developed a 'product' to help improve a pupil's ability to communicate, an ability which was being lost due to a rare disease. When Henrik talked about the assignment, he was very engaged and showed insight into the syndrome. Because the assignment was closely related to his experience and practice, he saw meaning in undertaking 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 positive learning experiences and the perception of entering into learning processes that are meaningful to his life and work situation are strong motivating factors in his engagement in further learning.

The above narratives demonstrated how as interviewees enhanced their self-efficacy, they became more confident in their willingness to use educational provision to support their career goals, despite their often relatively poor performance in initial education. Through their increasingly positive experience of learning in a range of settings interviewees found meaning in what they did and positive reinforcement to engage further with learning. For many interviewees, confidence in themselves and an understanding of their abilities and preferences, which had developed over time, played an important role in driving their learning. They were proactive in creating a virtuous circle of liking their work, being willing to undertake learning to improve their skills and developing a positive work identity and view of themselves. However, many individuals with poor initial qualifications may struggle to find work which enables them to develop in such ways.

## **Self-improvement**

A desire for self-improvement and personal development was identified as a driver of learning for 36 of the 105 interviewees. For instance, nine interviewees expressly saw their learning as driven by the need to be competent, to perform a job well and to gain new skills; 12 saw learning as a means to improve their social status; whilst 9 linked learning to gaining access to more challenging work. Six interviewees perceived their desire for self-improvement as resulting from their engagement with challenging work which in turn led them to be active in their own learning and development.

For some self-improvement, a need to perform the job well and a passion for the job were intertwined. Narratives from Poland and Italy illustrated an appreciation of the role of formal learning and engagement with lifelong informal learning as critical factors in vocational self-development and effective job performance. Frania (Polish interviewee) had two children and was running an (unregistered) hairdressing business from home. She completed the basic hairdressing trade school, but highlighted the lack of practical training. She was passionate about hairdressing, had aspirations to become a nurse and was very positive about adult learning:

Perhaps a two-year or one-year upper secondary school course, and then perhaps nursing school. I don't know if I

perhaps a two-year or one-year upper secondary school course, and then perhaps 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. PL, female, 29

Similarly, Alessia's (Italian interviewee) main driver for learning was a passion for her work. Alessia took an opportunity to work as an assistant with employees who had international experience and were attuned to fashion trends and techniques. She attended regular updating initiatives [short training courses of two to three days] located in Italy and abroad (especially Holland). She attended, on average, 10–12 training initiatives per year and 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 learnt 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 key, but you also have to understand how to manage the business as a whole. You have to develop a very peculiar dexterity. IT, female, 34

A desire for self-improvement was the driver for both Alessia's learning and working through '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 exigencies of such a person'.

Norberto (IT, male, 30) re-engaged with learning in order to improve himself. For him, formal learning was a form of the 'growing up' – in a broad sense – that he was unable to attain when younger.

The desire for self-improvement for some low-skilled workers was linked to their lack of initial educational qualifications which they regarded as a stigma, even if caused by external circumstances. Later in their career they may be confronted with barriers to their career progression or entry to higher education linked to their low level of qualification, coupled with feelings of regret or failure, and some are motivated to re-engage in formal learning. For such interviewees, learning was seen as an explicit attempt to improve one's social status by re-engaging with learning: [...] *having a baccalaureate was a necessary base. I wouldn't like to be seen as having only a VET certificate or nothing at all* (CZ, female, 26). In other cases prestige or feelings of inferiority were involved: *I have friends who have university degrees and I have just a VET certificate and sometimes I feel bad and stupid* (CZ, male, 25). For Giuseppe (IT), activating the desire for self-improvement was triggered by a colleague:

I was working with another young man, who subsequently became a friend of mine (he is also attending this course for accountants). 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. [...] This has happened suddenly [...] this desire was already there, ripening 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. IT, male, 28

Ilona (PL, female, 29) saw learning as key to her self-improvement:

If I went on working where I am now, I could get a promotion, be a leader, but for that you need, among other things, 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. PL, female, 29

Ilona planned to re-enter adult education, even though it would be difficult in her economic circumstances, in order to improve her educational attainment and employment opportunities and prospects.

Giovanni (IT) at the age of 30 decided to enrol 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. IT, male, 33

The idea of 'becoming a better person' was very important in Giovanni's narrative. For him, adult education was far from having just a material focus, he believed in the possibility of expanding 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 [...] 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. IT, male, 33

Nina (PL, female, 35) had three children and a partner who worked away from home. Her family duties restricted her educational plans but she appreciated the importance of learning and qualifications to realise her dream of becoming a teacher. She was ashamed of only having completed basic vocational education and resented having her 'merely trade school' graduate status pointed out at her daughter's pre-school where she helped out. Nina had become an enthusiastic learner and believed that learning was both pleasurable and important, and its outcomes – increased knowledge – produced genuine effects in life. Nina also had high educational aspirations for her children.

Alessandra's (IT) drive for self-improvement sought to compensate for leaving school early when, in order to escape an

unfavourable family context, she opted for personal autonomy and financial independence through taking low-profile jobs (mainly in tourist coffee-shops). Frustrated by these experiences:

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. IT, female, 27

Others also commented on the desirability of self-improvement to alleviate the shame they felt from having a poor education, but were less motivated or unable to do so due to their circumstances. Cinek (PL) had worked in construction all his life (legally and illegally) after completing basic construction trade school. He was not very keen on formal learning and emphasised the importance of practical experience in life. However, he recognised formal learning was important for his children and thought they may end up motivating him: *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.* PL, male, 37

Soňa (CZ) associated a desire for self-improvement with having returned to her vocational studies in order to get her baccalaureate:

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 the feeling that I've managed something [...] I didn't want to be 'average' [...] I am not the kind of person who comes home from work and does nothing apart from 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. CZ, female, 32

For a number of others, it was evident that equating learning with self-improvement did not have to involve engagement with educational programmes. It could link to the desire to undertake more challenging work and then personal development could be accomplished through a virtuous spiral of learning and working, especially given the affinity many low-skilled workers had with engaging with vocational work. For example, Isadora (DK) was driven by a need to be challenged on a daily basis. When working, she liked being in a challenging and changing environment, where she did not:

[...] get stuck in daily routines. Something must happen. You put 120 per cent 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. DK, female, 32

Although Isadora does not have formal qualifications, she achieved this challenging work through success in various long-term positions. Regarding her first job as a manager in a variety store, Isadora said she would have stayed in that job if it was not for the new manager with whom she did not get along. She reflected 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'. DK, female, 32

Later, when she opened her own company, she also found herself being challenged by every new assignment. It is evident that while Isadora had found formal learning environments somewhat challenging, partly due to boredom, non-formal (and informal) workplace learning has suited her very well. Without formal qualifications Isadora had managed to get a range of jobs, including several which would normally be considered to require a skilled, qualified person.

These narratives illustrated how even those with a strong desire for self-improvement and positive experiences of learning as adults may still perceive their low formal educational achievements as a cultural impediment and a hindrance in acquiring an acceptable position in the labour market. These perceptions were generally accompanied by mixed feelings towards learning, linked to deeper reasons of personal and social unease. Many struggled to overcome low self-efficacy and their vocational projects and self-construction strategies may have been confused (Savickas, 2007). Their desire for increasing their learning agency was sometimes constrained by a poor personal support infrastructure.

### **Labour market-orientated learning**

Thirty-two of the 105 low-skilled interviewees viewed adult education and training through the tangible benefits it brought related to salary, career development or labour market insertion. For some interviewees, education was regarded as a 'sacrifice' (in terms of effort, opportunity costs, etc.) and thus must 'pay-off'. Tangible and immediate outcomes were sometimes expressed as a pre-condition for engaging in formal learning activities as an adult, often based on a negative experience where a previous educational experience did not lead to the desired outcome.

For our interviewees, the development of work-related competencies were often regarded as key to their job situation, either by becoming better skilled in the job they already held, improving job security and/or prospects for getting a (better) job, with learning goals expressed in terms of:

- The need to improve their position in the labour market (6 interviewees);
- The need to gain employment or change jobs (3);

- The need to gain employment or change jobs (5);
- To keep up with requirements of the job (3);
- To improve their employment prospects (4);
- To change careers (2);
- To gain financial stability and achieve a better salary (12);
- Desire to gain a skilled worker identity (2).

For many, learning was driven by the need to improve their prospects in the labour market. Alice (CZ) had great difficulties finding her first job when she returned home from abroad:

After 6 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. CZ, female, 33

The retraining course helped her find a job as a secretary. Subsequently, she had a part-time job as a shop assistant and her primary motivation was to find permanent full-time employment:

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 a training in commerce and selling skills, it would show the employer that I am motivated and perhaps he would propose for me a better contract. CZ, female, 33

In Gabriele's (IT) and Rosina's (IT) narratives, career opportunities constituted the main driver towards formal learning. They were clear that they wanted to get a diploma in accountancy and acquire useful vocational knowledge in this field. Rosina took her adult 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* (IT, female, 27). Rosina's driver for learning was a 'practical' and 'material' goal. Also for Gabriele the main driver towards formal learning was very practical, intrinsic to his work and life path. Five years previously he had found his latest job as a temporary assistant. He slowly, but significantly, progressed over time. He became expert in tasks that were simple but very useful in every organisation (setting-up computers, handling the wire transfer system, taking care of photocopiers, etc.). Colleagues in the bank – clerks and managers – spurred him into changing his status through getting a diploma, thereby increasing his chance of getting a better, more stable, contract. He thus decided to enrol in evening school and kept studying and he was close to completing his final exams.

I found myself in a position in which I was enabled in affording 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. IT, male, 34

A change of employment and the necessity to keep up with the requirements of the job can be an important driver for learning. For instance, Bernard (CZ) was trained as a carpenter, but after an unsuccessful experience as an entrepreneur in this field several years previously, he needed to find a new job. He moved to the automotive industry and it forced him to re-engage in learning activities in order 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 your 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. CZ, male, 35

A change of vocational orientation can facilitate reintegration into the labour market and increase the willingness of a person to engage in learning activities. For instance, Rudolf (CZ) acquired significant experience in the construction industry. However, he could not find a sustainable job in this field following an economic recession. He then thought about retraining:

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 now, with the economic crisis. CZ, male, 39

A few interviewees considered their learning was driven almost exclusively by the potential for financial rewards. Martin (CZ), for example, switched career to become a personal financial counsellor after considering the financial benefits of retraining and would not consider enrolling in a general educational programme.

### **Work-related practical learning**

Twenty-seven of the 105 low-skilled interviewees drew attention to the importance of the practical nature of learning as important to their engagement with work related learning.

Davide (IT, male, 38, carpenter) saw learning as a practice-based process driven by curiosity, a spirit of observation, and trial and error. A major role was played by his passion for the transformation of matter which he perceived as an almost



and error. A major role was played by his passion for the transformation of matter, which he perceived as an almost sacred event: 'It really struck me to see that from a piece of wood one can create a piece of furniture'. The theme of practical and applicable outcomes of learning was a recurring one. Twelve interviewees who entered continuing vocational education and training (CVET) and had success were consequently enthusiastic about vocational learning, especially as approaches to learning in school and in CVET were seen as very different. Learners experiencing this vocational pedagogy were sometimes positively surprised and motivated to do more training, especially where initial education was seen as too theoretical or disconnected from the labour market. For instance, Juraj 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 can show some practical examples* (CZ, male, 38). 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, female, 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, female, 33

Bernard (CZ) participated in a short internal training programme in the automotive company he worked for. It positively surprised him in terms of practical outcomes and motivated him to actively work on his vocational 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. CZ, male, 35

Ten interviewees reflected on the need for learning to be relevant to what they were doing at work. Learning on the job was seen as motivating. For instance, this form of learning was linked to their self-image as being practical people. Rudolf 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* (CZ, male, 39). Success on the job was viewed as a powerful driver of learning for seven interviewees. Learning on the job and getting immediate positive feedback can be a source of great personal satisfaction and can motivate some workers to invest in their career: *you can always pick up something at work which enriches you, really just by listening to your team leader.*

Several participants expressed their conviction that real learning was done in 'real situations' linked to concrete content and results. Some interviewees had difficulties in reading and writing, which enhanced their search for visible feed-back in working situations. Roberto (IT) was reluctant to engage with formal study: *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* (IT8, male, 38). He was committed to experiential learning. Michele (IT, male, 41) had learned in context from observation and imitation throughout his working life in a variety of occupational roles, including assistant chef, cashier, cook, commis, barman, gourmet, pizza-maker and janitor. Some of Michele's personal qualities (kindness, friendliness, openness, initiative and communication skills) opened doors to new learning opportunities; those qualities were strong enough to compensate for **from** shortcomings deriving from the lack of formal education.

The practical focus of work-related learning was not only a spur to engagement with that learning, but also chimed with a developing view of themselves as practical people who could successfully engage with learning if that learning was perceived as directly relevant to their work identities.

### **Significant others motivating learning**

Twenty-six of the 105 low-skilled interviewees expressly mentioned the role of others in supporting their learning. They recognised their individual effort could be amplified with support from others. Significant others were found to play a key role in the narratives of some individuals driving and motivating them to re-engage in learning. The role of a teacher, mentor or an expert was important in some narratives. Personal contact can foster the willingness of a person to engage in learning and in a number of narratives significant others played an important role:

- A parent (4 interviewees);
- A teacher, tutor or mentor in adult education (12 interviewees);
- Colleagues (2 interviewees);
- Others who have re-engaged in learning and who have experienced a positive outcome in terms of career progression or labour market integration (2 interviewees);
- Identification with professionals with experience of 'real' working situations (6 interviewees).

For Jim (UK), his parents had played a significant role, with his father arguing:

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. UK, male, 32

His mother, who encouraged him to try out new activities, corroborated this:

So I'd say [...] my mum's probably 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. UK, male, 32

Karla's (CZ) passion for her job can be traced back to an exceptional teacher during her vocational education and training. Although she did not finish her studies, a good teacher/mentor was for her the basic precondition for engaging in learning activities later in life:

In the 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 [...] I love my work, I have been passionate about it since the second year of my studies and the classes with that teacher [...] The most important factor is the lecturer, he or she must be helpful. CZ, female, 39

Colleagues could also act as a spur to learning, as was the case with Giuseppe (IT) mentioned previously. Many narratives expressed an emotional process influencing learning progression. Teachers and tutors were often mentioned in this regard as illustrated above, but there was also a sense that a role model because of their 'real working experience' could be inspirational for their learning. Such individuals could be trainers, managers or workers not just tutors and a positive relationship could inspire the learner through a process of identification with what it would be like to be an experienced skilled worker in the field. Such professionals could intervene in formal or informal learning and were seen as people with experience and understanding of 'real' working situations. Some interviewees had excellent memories of some learning prompted by good teachers, who could link theory and practice, give concrete examples and answer their questions. Jiřina (CZ) participated in a master class in nail-shaping with a Russian champion in this field. It was extremely motivating:

This training was something amazing. I learned great things just from watching (the trainer) work for 20 minutes. And we continued for five days. If I should go on another training, I would rather choose 10 minutes with this trainer than any training that is obligatory by the regulations. CZ, female, 29

A positive example of others who have re-engaged in learning and achieved positive career outcomes could be a motivator for those hesitant about re-engaging in learning. For Michal (CZ), motivation to engage in education was inhibited by his diagnosis of ADHD at school. This affected his self-confidence, but seeing a colleague succeed motivated him:

At first, it seemed like 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 a 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. (CZ, male, 38)

The support, encouragement and example of others could act to boost the motivation of the low skilled to engage in learning.

## Discussion of findings

The literature review highlighted the importance of four sets of factors relating to the individual; the work-related context; the nature of work-related learning; and relationships with others. The research reported here drew upon the narratives of low-skilled workers with experience of a wide range of different education, training and employment contexts in the seven countries. Of those who successfully engaged with learning and development opportunities about one in six recounted that they first had to rebuild confidence in their learning ability in order to overcome negative experiences of compulsory education. Enhanced self-efficacy could then be a platform in the attempt to build a successful career. However, for one in three interviewees, a more generalised desire for self-improvement and personal development was a major driver of their learning. Opportunities and challenges at work were often mentioned as influencing the desire for further personal development. Access to such work was problematic for a significant minority of interviewees, particularly in Italy, Czech Republic and Poland.

The importance of the work-related context was further underpinned in that thirty per cent of the interviewees saw the development of work-related competencies as key to their job situation. They saw learning and development as a means to improving their prospects in the labour market, by becoming better skilled in the job they already held, improving their job security and/or their prospects for getting a (better) job. The practical focus of much work-related learning linked to this labour market orientation was not only a spur to engagement with that learning, but for about a quarter of interviewees this chimed with a view of themselves as practical people. Such people could successfully engage with learning if that learning was perceived as directly relevant to their work identities (Brown, 1997). For one in four interviewees, the support, encouragement and example of others acted to boost the motivation of the low skilled to engage in learning.

The interviewees were divided between those who wanted tangible and immediate outcomes for any proposed learning and those who saw learning primarily as a means of self-improvement. The lack of initial educational qualifications was

sometimes seen as a personal or social stigma, which meant they were willing to re-engage in formal learning to rectify the perceived deficit. Some interviewees with negative experiences of initial education were motivated to re-engage by a positive experience with continuing education, encouragement of significant others or through an experience of mastery of challenges at work which led to an increase in their self-efficacy. For many interviewees, practical learning was particularly appreciated, whether undertaken to secure or enhance their current labour market position or undertaken to increase their self-efficacy.

## Conclusion

The five identified drivers of learning could be placed in the wider context of how careers develop over time (Brown & Bimrose, 2014). Their learning can be seen as a form of personal and skill development which takes place within particular contexts and opportunity structures, and which contributes to forms of identity development where personal, social and work identities can be reframed. The findings also align with and flesh out the OECD skills survey (2013) as to the different ways participation in learning activities can bring about important labour market and social outcomes for the low skilled. The findings also reinforce the view of Illeris (2010) of how the content of learning, in this case often practical and work-related knowledge, understanding and skills, can act upon the motivation and emotional dimension of learning in ways which then drive engagement with learning in ways often absent earlier in the learning careers of the low skilled.

This practical work-related route for substantive skill development does not necessarily apply to all those in low-skilled positions for two reasons. First, access to significant challenge in work may be circumscribed by the nature of their work, which has fewer opportunities for learning while working than more highly skilled work (Bimrose, Brown, Barnes, & Hughes, 2011; Brown et al., 2010). Second, while for some low-skilled individuals the relative lack of success in learning in compulsory education focuses their attention on other forms of learning, other individuals feel later in life that they still have something to prove and are willing to engage with adult education for reasons of personal development. Either way, it is clear that successful learning trajectories for the low skilled are intertwined with broader processes of identity development at work (Brown and Bimrose, in press; Ivanic et al., 2007). Where individuals in low-skilled work were able to recognise that learning activities and related social practices could extend across a range of education, training and employment contexts, then learning could be seen as an activity which actively crosses boundaries and could enhance their careers and personal development.

AQ3

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AQ4

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AQ6

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