

## Break in the time series of lifelong learning in 2024

Eurostat encouraged the various member states to improve and extend the questions on lifelong learning in the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Statbel also made these changes to the questionnaire, leading to a break in the time series in the results on lifelong learning, in 2024.

**Lifelong learning** refers to the participation of adults (aged 25-64) in education and training (also referred to as formal and non-formal learning). This indicator is usually measured over the last year or the last 4 weeks. **Formal learning** is education that is recognised by the ministries of education and usually leads to a diploma or certificate such as a master's degree or a training course in adult education. **Non-formal learning** refers to trainings outside the context of formal learning but still organised in a structured way, e.g. a course on health organised by the health insurance fund or a webinar on time management organised by a self-employed, etc.

Formal learning is usually quite clear: you are either enrolled in a higher education institution or you are not. Measuring non-formal learning in a survey is much more difficult: the respondent must know what is meant by non-formal learning and, during the survey, one must remember whether one participated in such a training during the reference period. Different questions in different member states resulted in different results. This is the reason why Eurostat encouraged member states to improve and extend the survey. This note is about improving the measurement of non-formal learning in Belgium.

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## Changes to the questions on formal and non-formal learning as a result of the new European framework regulation ([EU regulation 2019/1700](#))

In 2021, a new European framework regulation (EU Regulation 2019/1700) became applicable to the data collection of various surveys in the domain of social statistics (IESS<sup>1</sup> Regulation). The IESS regulation stipulated that in the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the variables EDUCFED4, EDUCLEV4, EDUCNFE4 should be collected every quarter, and the variables EDUCFED12, EDUCLEV12, EDUCNFE12 every two years (in even years).

More specifically, it concerns the following variables:

EDUCFED4: Participation in formal education and training (student or apprentice) in the last 4 weeks  
EDUCLEV4: Level of the most recent formal education or training activity in the last 4 weeks  
EDUCNFE4: Participation in non-formal education and training in the last 4 weeks  
EDUCFED12: Participation in formal education and training (student or apprentice) in the last 12 months  
EDUCLEV12: Level of the most recent formal education or training activity in the last 12 months  
EDUCNFE12: Participation in non-formal education and training in the last 12 months

Before 2021, only the four-week indicators were mandatory in LFS for Eurostat and Belgium voluntarily included the 12-month indicators annually (in the first wave). Consequently, Belgium has already had a series of annual figures since 2005 for the 12-month indicator, so that it was not considered expedient, initially, to reformulate this question in order to preserve the annual time series. The five- or six-yearly Adult Education Survey (AES) has always served as a basis for comparison between European countries, and policy objectives such as those of the European Education Area and the European Pillar of Social Rights have been measured using this survey.

Since 2022, Eurostat (and therefore the other European countries) does have a 12-month indicator comparable between the different countries, based on the LFS. It was decided fairly quickly that the policy objectives would be evaluated on the basis of the biennial LFS. It was then just as quickly noted that in almost all European countries, lifelong learning was rated lower in the LFS survey than in the AES survey, although the concepts and definitions are the same in both surveys. This has also been observed for some time in Belgium. Eurostat itself published a note<sup>2</sup> about the differences between these surveys. This note indicates that AES probably measures lifelong learning better, but that trends are better measured with LFS and that LFS is also better suited for more detailed analyses (because the AES sample is much smaller than that of LFS).

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<sup>1</sup> [IESS= Integrated European Social Statistics](#)

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser-backend/api/public/explanatory-notes/get/Info\\_note\\_TRNG\\_AL\\_20240423.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser-backend/api/public/explanatory-notes/get/Info_note_TRNG_AL_20240423.pdf)

## Changes to the Belgian questionnaire for non-formal learning in 2024

As the difference between AES and LFS was large in many countries, Eurostat recommended to adjust the questions in LFS to bring the results between AES and LFS more in line. Eurostat recommended splitting the question on participation in non-formal learning into three questions, namely:

- Participation in courses, trainings outside regular education
- Participation in workshops, congresses, seminars, lectures
- Participation in private lessons

This way, the question is more in line with the Adult Education Survey.

More specifically, from 2024 on the following questions are asked in the Belgian Labour Force Survey (LFS) in all waves:

Did you attend any **courses or trainings** outside regular education during the reference month? These may include courses at public employment offices, language courses in private institutions, etc.  
During the reference month, did you attend any **workshop, congress, seminar, lecture**?  
During the reference month, did you take **private lessons**?

Respondents who answer "no" are also asked the following question in the first wave (per form of non-formal learning):

Did you attend such trainings in the last 12 months?

The answer categories for each question are as follows:

- yes and at least one such training was related to your job (or previous/future job)
- yes but no such training was related to your job (or previous/future job)
- no

These questions therefore replace the following questions that were asked before 2024:

Did you attend any **courses, seminars, conferences, etc.** outside the regular education system during the reference month? These may include courses at public employment offices, language courses in private institutions, etc.

If the respondent answered "no", the following question was also asked in the first wave:

And during the last 12 months?

And if the answer was positive, the following additional question was asked:

Was this course, seminar or conference work-related? If you have participated in more than one activity, it is sufficient that one of those activities was work-related.

- Yes, work-related
- No, no work-related training activity

## Consequences of the modified questions in 2024

Initially (during the first quarter of 2024), only the questionnaire of the first wave was adjusted because our objective was to bring the 12-month indicator (which is only surveyed in the first wave) in line with the AES questionnaire. However, it soon became clear that the break was greater than expected and that there was also an effect on the 4-week indicator in the first wave. This is why we decided to also adjust the questions in the second to fourth waves in the same way as those in the first wave as from the third quarter of 2024<sup>3</sup>. This has caused a break in the lifelong learning indicators in both the 12-month and 4-week indicators, which will still have some effect in 2025. However, the changes made and the resulting break were necessary to achieve a better and more realistic measurement of participation in lifelong learning and should enable better comparability with AES. Despite the harmonisation of the wording of the questions, there are still differences between AES and LFS, such as the organisation method, the methodology and the purpose of the survey, which means that the results of both surveys will continue to differ in the future.

## Impact on the results of lifelong learning

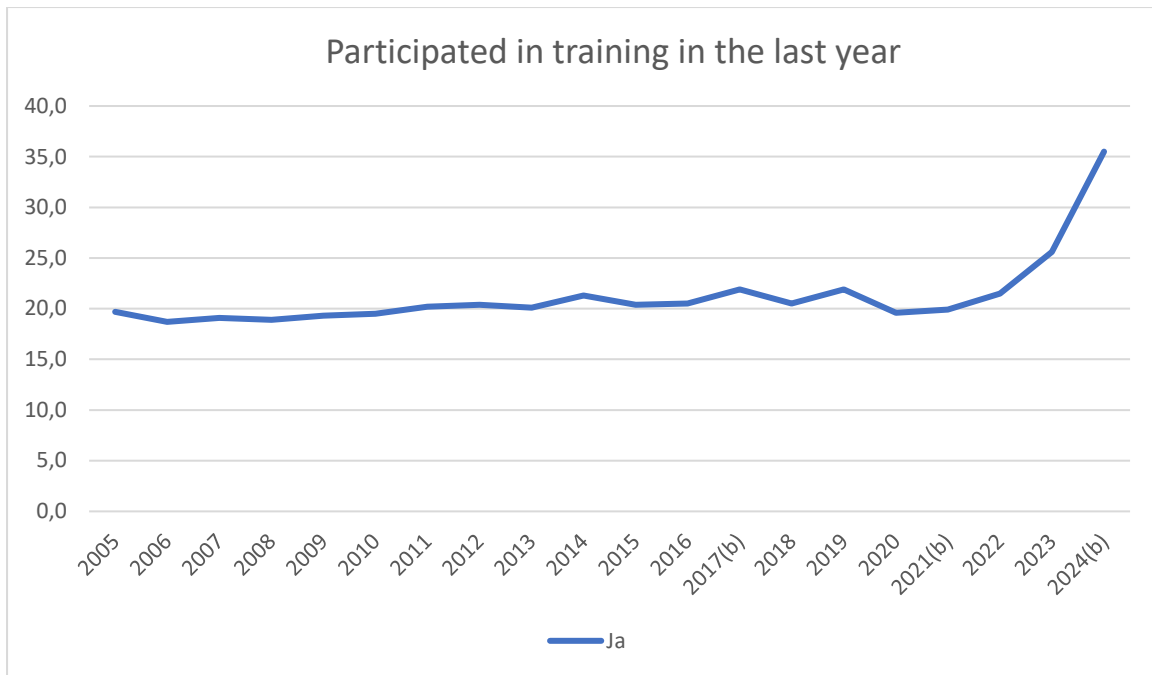
### 12-month indicator

We see that lifelong learning has increased enormously in recent years. In 2022, 21.5% participated in lifelong learning, in 2023 (without changing the questionnaire) 25.6%, and the more extensive questions show that 35.5% of the population participated in lifelong learning in the last 12 months.

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<sup>3</sup> For more info about the wave and panel design of

LFS: [https://statbel.fgov.be/sites/default/files/Over\\_Statbel\\_FR/Analyse\\_eak\\_2017\\_nl\\_20181220.pdf](https://statbel.fgov.be/sites/default/files/Over_Statbel_FR/Analyse_eak_2017_nl_20181220.pdf)



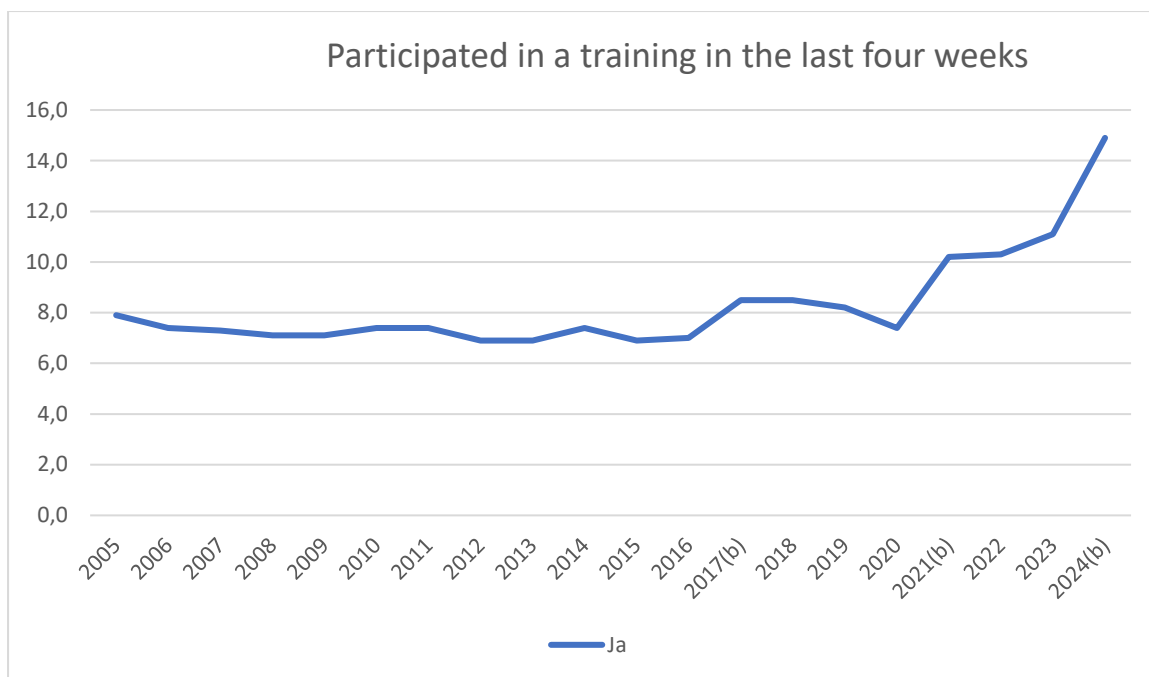
(b) Break in 2017 in the results following a considerable reform of the Labour Force Survey. In 2021 due to the revision of the questionnaire and the change in the ILO definitions of unemployment and employment. Break in the results in 2024 due to an extension in the survey of non-formal learning.

**Table. Percentage of persons who participated in (no) education or training in the last twelve months, per quarter**

	2022				2023				2024			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1 (b)	2	3	4
<b>NO</b>	77.7	80.4	79.5	76.5	75	75.1	74.2	73.2	65.5	65.4	65.1	61.8
<b>YES</b>	22.3	19.6	20.5	23.5	25	24.9	25.8	26.8	34.5	34.6	34.9	38.2

### Four-week indicator

The four-week indicator has been available since 1999, but for comparability purposes, we show it here from 2005 onwards. We also see a clear increase in the most recent years: in 2022, 10.3% had participated in lifelong learning in the last four weeks, in 2023 (without changing the questionnaire) 11.1% and the more extensive questions show that 14.9% had participated in lifelong learning in the last four weeks.



(b) Break in 2017 in the results following a considerable reform of the Labour Force Survey. In 2021 due to the revision of the questionnaire and the change in the ILO definitions of unemployment and employment. Break in the results in 2024 due to an extension in the survey of non-formal learning.

We generally see a clear increase in the first and second quarters, after which lifelong learning drops back a little during the summer holidays, and then increases again in the fourth quarter. So, in the third quarter, we see an increase from 8.6% in 2023 to 12.7% in 2024 in lifelong learning, in the fourth quarter from 12.6% in 2023 to 18.7% in 2024. We clearly see the change in the questionnaire in wave 4 (although it was already adjusted in the third quarter). We therefore also expect a further increase for this question in the first two quarters of 2025 for the waves 2-4.

**Table. Percentage of persons who participated in (no) education or training in the last four weeks, per quarter**

	2022				2023				2024			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1 (b)	2	3	4
<b>NO</b>	89.3	89.1	92	88.6	88.2	88.7	91.4	87.4	86.8	85	87.3	81.3
<b>YES</b>	10.7	10.9	8	11.4	11.8	11.3	8.6	12.6	13.2	15	12.7	18.7

**Table. Percentage of persons who participated in education or training in the last four weeks, per quarter and wave**

QUAR TER	2022				2023				2024				
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1 (b W1)	2	3 (b W2-4)	4	
<b>YES</b>	W1	12.8	11.6	10.4	13.0	15.4	14.9	12.6	15.6	<b>22.1</b>	<b>22.7</b>	<b>15.7</b>	<b>20.4</b>
	W2	10.7	9.1	6.6	11.0	9.9	11.1	7.1	12.1	10.4	12.3	<b>11.1</b>	<b>17.6</b>
	W3	10.7	11.2	7.5	10.7	10.2	8.8	7.7	11.1	10.3	12.0	<b>13.1</b>	<b>18.8</b>
	W4	8.9	11.7	7.5	11.0	11.4	10.0	6.9	11.4	9.6	12.8	<b>10.9</b>	<b>18.1</b>