

## Low qualified and low skilled: the need for context sensitive careers support

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### ABSTRACT

The research investigation into the career trajectories of low-skilled, mid-career individuals in Europe, on which this symposium focused, has emphasised the importance of career support. Participants sometimes had not even completed their initial school qualifications. Often, though not always, they had significant skill deficits. The majority of participants typically had not had any consistent access to high-quality support services at critical turning points in their career trajectories. In some cases, the inappropriate and/or poor quality of the career support had become part of the problem. Findings indicate that career support services for these individuals must be based on context-sensitive frameworks for practice, which integrate knowledge and understanding of the broad social and economic factors that impact their career trajectories.

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## Introduction

Findings from the research investigation into the career trajectories of low-qualified, mid-career adults in Europe, on which this article is based, emphasised the importance of high-quality career guidance support. Some participants in the study had not even completed their initial school qualifications. Often (though not always) they had significant skill deficits. Fifteen narrative interviews were conducted in each of the seven countries participating in the research: Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the UK. This article focuses on the experience of the 30 participants, aged between 24 and 46, drawn from France and the UK. The focus of these interviews was on understanding individual career and learning experiences, together with the narratives that link past, present and possible future career transitions and labour market experiences. The stories revealed collective experiences and contextual detail. It should be noted that the participants left school between 1985 and 2005, so some had been in the labour market for up to 28 years. Detailing the changes to the contextual backgrounds in the labour markets of these two countries during this time period is beyond the scope of this article. However, because research participants were low qualified, they had been confronted with barriers in their labour market transitions at some point in their careers. How they coped with this adversity was one focus of the research.

With only a few exceptions (like entrepreneurs who had become managers of their own small businesses in, for example, hairdressing and butchery retail), participants were in occupational roles that designated them to a low socio-economic status, typified by low pay, low status, limited job prospects and relatively poor job security. Attitudes to learning, developed from early (often negative) experiences of school, emerged as key indicators of successful career progression. The