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Lifelong Learning and Adults



This chapter draws on various sources to examine evidence and recommendations regarding adult education and training, and lifelong learning more widely. It brings together survey information on individuals in the adult population, education system information, enterprise data, and research findings on the ageing process. Wide differences exist between countries in which organised learning is a common adult activity and where it remains much less common. The majority of the learning undertaken relates to non-formal job-related training, and in the formal education sector there are countries where very few older adults are found. Studies of ageing show the clear benefits of continued learning. Findings and conclusions from OECD studies on key areas such as financing (especially co-financing), guidance, the recognition of non-formal learning, and qualifications systems are presented, some of these from the mid-2000s. Certain education systems are more successful than others at teaching non-native languages to adults. Analysis on the literacy and life skills of adults informs the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) which will provide a powerful comparative data set on foundation skills and human capital in 2013.



INTRODUCTION

With agreement on the importance of lifelong learning in the OECD and by countries, it is natural that adult participation in education and training has been a focus of statistical work, research and policy analysis. The international data show how wide the variations between countries are in terms of adult participation in formal and non-formal education, with very marked differences according to the qualification levels of the adults, and also by age (see also Chapter 7). Lifelong learning has been a defining goal for education and training policies for many years, emphasising the need for organised learning to take place over the whole lifespan and across the different main spheres that make up our lives (“life-wide”). While the OECD acknowledges its importance, lifelong learning has not been the focus of holistic analyses in recent years.

The OECD has conducted international reviews bringing together the education and employment perspectives on provision and policies for adult learning, with complementary studies on qualifications, financing and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Languages in a Global World, published in 2012, explores why some people are successful in learning non-native languages and others not, and why certain education systems appear more successful than others at teaching non-native languages. OECD analysis on the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey has offered an overview of the foundation skills of adults in the domains prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy, problem solving and, indirectly, familiarity with and use of information and communication technologies (ICT). This work informs the ambitious OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) which is underway and aims to publish a powerful comparative data set on foundation skills and human capital in 2013. With information from 5 000 participants in each country, it covers: key cognitive skills; educational attainment and skill formation; skill use in the workplace and elsewhere; labour market outcomes; characteristics of individuals; and changes in literacy and numeracy skills over time.

KEY FINDINGS

Only a minority of adults engage in organised formal or non-formal learning over the course of a year: Combining formal and non-formal education and training, only a minority of adults participate in such activity over a year across OECD countries as a whole (40%), even when “education” is widely understood to include short seminars, lectures or workshops. The proportion ranges widely however, from more than 60% in New Zealand and Sweden to less than 15% in Greece and Hungary. As these are overall averages, they hide still wider variations between adults of different ages or levels of education. Across OECD countries, half of 25-34 year-olds participate in formal and/or non-formal education while only about a quarter do so among 55-64 year-olds (27%). This means that there is a very wide gap between the 14% participation rate for those in the older cohort with a low level of education and a rate more than four times greater at 65% for younger adults with tertiary-level education.

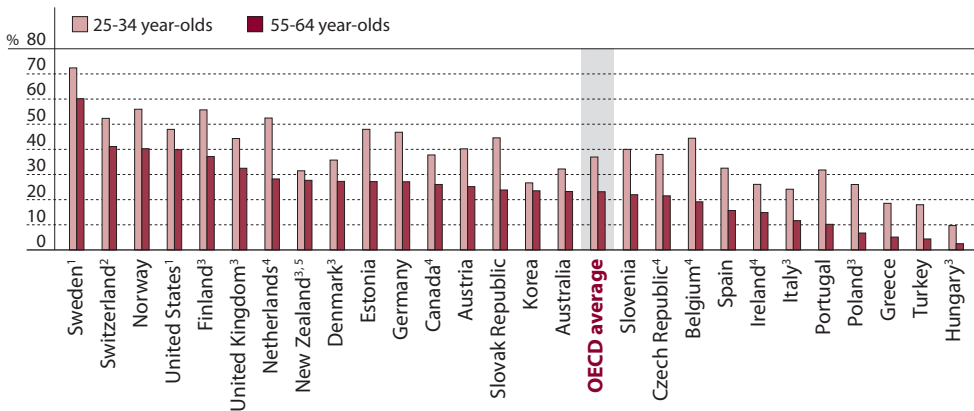
 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C6*



Only one in sixteen adults aged 30-39 is enrolled either full- or part-time in formal education in OECD countries, and students make up no more than one in 1.5% of the 40+ age group: The 20-29 year-olds enrolled in education, while all are “adults”, include many who are completing their initial cycles of education and training. For older adults, 6.1% of the 30-39 year-olds across OECD countries are enrolled in education, full- or part-time. It is significantly higher than this in certain countries at 10% or more: Australia (12.0%), Finland (15.4%), Iceland (13.6%), New Zealand (11.8%) and Sweden (13.7%). Some countries are unable to make the corresponding calculations for the 40+ age group, but where they can, the highest levels of enrolment are found in Australia (4.7%), Belgium (3.7%), Finland (3.6%), Iceland (3.7%) and New Zealand (4.7%).

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C1*

Figure 5.1.
Participation in non-formal education, by age group (2007)



1. Year of reference 2005.

2. Year of reference 2009.

3. Year of reference 2006.

4. Year of reference 2008.

5. Excludes adults who participated only in “short seminars, lectures, workshops or special talks”.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the participation rate of 55-64 year-olds (2007).

Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Table C6.4a. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012).

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There are countries where to be enrolled in formal education as an older adult remains a very rare occurrence: With an OECD average of just above 6% for adults in their thirties in formal education, there are naturally countries where the level is significantly lower. Those at half the average enrolment rate for 30-39 year-olds or less include: France (2.7%), Germany (3%), Greece (1.0%), Korea (2.0%), Luxembourg (1.5%) and the Netherlands (3.0%).



Lack of data prevent a number of OECD countries from making the corresponding calculations for the 40+ age group; where they can do so, 0.5% or fewer of these mature adults are in full- or part-time education in the Czech Republic (0.5%), Germany (0.2%), Italy (0.1%), Korea (0.5%), Luxembourg (0.2%), Switzerland (0.5%) and Turkey (0.4%).

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C1*

About a third of adults across OECD countries participates in non-formal education: In 2007, on average across OECD countries, 34% of adults (25-64 year-olds) participated in non-formal education. Participation rates vary from over 50% in Finland, Norway and Sweden, at one end of the spectrum, to less than 15% in Greece, Hungary and Turkey. Young adults (25-34 year-olds) are 1.6 times more likely to participate in non-formal education than the 55-64 year-olds.

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C6*

Across the OECD, just over a quarter of working-age adults have recently participated in job-related learning, with the highest levels in some Nordic countries: A comfortable majority of the participants in adult educational activities are found in work-related learning. In 2007, just over a quarter of the population aged 25-64 (29%) in OECD countries participated in job-related non-formal education. The country variations are wide. The countries that register the highest participation at over 40% are Finland (44%), Norway (47%) and Sweden (61%), Switzerland (42%), with Germany and the Slovak Republic not far behind at 38%. However, less than 15% of adults participated in job-related learning in Greece (11%), Hungary (6%), Italy (14%), Korea (11%), Turkey (9%) with Poland and Portugal also under 20%. As expected, participation in such forms of learning is significantly higher among those in employment than for the unemployed across OECD countries as a whole.

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C6*


In the majority of OECD countries, employers invest more in the non-formal education of an employee with a high level of education than in an employee with a low level of education: In 2007, the annual cost of the working time devoted to employer-sponsored non-formal education per employee amounted to USD 931. This represents 2.4% of the average annual labour cost of an employee. The cost increases from USD 659 for employees with a low level of educational attainment to USD 1 235 for employees with high levels of education. Exceptions are Canada and Denmark, where relatively more investment goes to employees with a low level of education. The differences in investment according to the educational level of the employees are small in Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C6*

Despite the common emphasis on constructing knowledge-based economies, there has been a slight downward trend in Europe in jobs using high levels of learning, discretion and complexity: Data from the European Survey of Working Conditions show that while a large share of European workers have access to work settings that call for learning and



problem solving, there has been a slight downward trend over the decade from 1995 in the proportion of employees having access to work settings characterised by high levels of learning, complexity and discretion. There are important variations in the spread of learning organisations across the European Union, ranging from 65% of salaried employees in such organisations in Sweden in 2005 to only around 20% in Spain among OECD countries.

 *Innovative Workplaces: Making Better Use of Skills within Organisations, 2010, Chapter 6*


Insufficient opportunities for education are not the principal reason why many adults do not engage in learning: Evidence on barriers to participation suggests that under-investment in adult learning is due more to the demand side than to lack of supply of learning opportunities. Many adults are simply not interested. This can be because they are not aware of the need for training or because of lack of information, lack of incentives or a perceived lack of returns. When asked about the obstacles, most refer to the key problem of lack of time, mainly due to work or family obligations (the opportunity costs). Lack of resources to pay for training is another issue. The time required for training and the resulting opportunity costs could be reduced through more systematic recognition of acquired skills and competences, more efficient forms of training, individualised programmes of study, and more effective information and advice. Co-financing can help to share the time costs for training as well as the direct costs.

 *Promoting Adult Learning, 2005, Chapter 5*

Brain research provides important additional support for adults' continued learning throughout the lifespan: One of the most powerful set of neurological findings on learning concerns the brain's remarkable properties of "plasticity" – to grow in response to experience and to prune itself when parts become unnecessary. This continues throughout the lifespan, and far further into old age than had previously been understood. The demands made on the individual and in his/her learning are key to the plasticity – the more one learns, the more one can learn. Neuroscience has shown that learning is a lifelong activity in which the more that it continues, the more effective it is.

 *Understanding the Brain: The Birth of a Learning Science, 2007, Chapter 2*

Brain research confirms the wider benefits of learning, especially for ageing populations: For older people, cognitive engagement, regular physical exercise and an active social life promote learning and can delay degeneration of the ageing brain. The enormous and costly problems represented by dementia in ever-ageing populations can be addressed through the learning interventions being identified through neuroscience. Combinations of improved diagnostics, opportunities to exercise, appropriate and validated pharmacological treatment, and good educational intervention can do much to maintain positive well-being and to prevent deterioration.

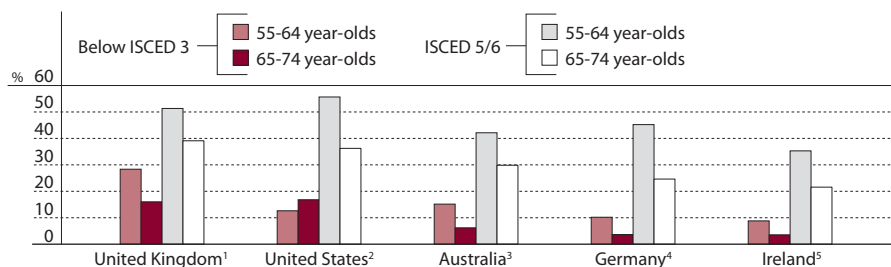
 *Understanding the Brain: The Birth of a Learning Science, 2007, Chapter 2; "Ageing and Skills: A Review and Analysis of Skill Gain and Skill Loss Over the Lifespan and Over Time", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 72, 2012*



Box 5.1. Participation in adult learning for 65-74 year-olds

In an ageing society, individuals increasingly need to stay in employment well into their sixties or seventies. Using, updating and acquiring skills remains important into retirement age as a means to promote active citizenship and social participation beyond the workplace.

In 2007, the participation of 65-74 year-olds in formal and/or non-formal learning ranged from more than 20% in the United Kingdom and the United States to 4% in Spain. In the six countries for which data are available, older women participate more often in formal and/or non-formal education than men of the same age. The steady decline in the participation rate observed for the younger age groups continues for the 55-64 year-olds although not at the same rate for all countries. In the United Kingdom and the United States, the age groups differ least in their participation rates and the participation rate of 55-64 year-olds is relatively high. The drop in participation rates from one age group to the next is largest in countries where the participation rate of the younger elderly is low, as in Spain and Ireland.

Percentage of 55-64 year-olds and 65-74 year-olds who have participated in formal and/or non-formal education, by educational attainment (2007)

1. Year of reference 2006.

2. Year of reference 2005.

3. The data for 55-64 year-olds and 65-74 year-olds are from different survey sources.

4. Year of reference 2007.

5. Year of reference 2008.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the participation rate of 65-74 year-olds with tertiary education.

Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Table C6.11. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012).

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In all six countries, older persons with tertiary education participate in formal and/or non-formal education more often than those with low levels of education. In Australia, Germany, Ireland and the United Kingdom, the relative advantage of people with tertiary education is higher for the oldest age group than for the next youngest age group. The impact of educational attainment on participation rates is weaker for the young elderly in Spain and the United States.



Large proportions of adults in OECD countries and other advanced economies have low levels of proficiency in key foundation skills: OECD analysis on foundation skills, i.e. skills in prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy, problem solving, and familiarity with ICT, of adults in 11 countries or regions showed that large proportions of adults have low levels of proficiency in these key foundation skills. Significant proportions of adults display poor levels of proficiency in one or more of the skill domains and many perform poorly in all domains. Even in the best performing countries (the Netherlands and Norway), low performance in at least one skill domain is the reality for over half of the adult population. Much of the differences in the level and distribution of proficiency can be explained by social background, educational attainment and a range of variables relating to use of and engagement with literacy and numeracy and the ways adults lead their lives.

 *Literacy for Life: Further Results From the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey, 2011, Conclusions*

There are individual and social benefits from learning non-native languages: Both individuals and societies enhance their economic prospects through the mastery of languages, so that there are personal, academic and global reasons for ensuring that students learn different languages. Research supports the spillover benefits to other academic skills from learning to speak other languages. Learning non-native languages creates appreciation for cultural differences, associated with greater tolerance.

 *Languages in a Global World: Learning for Better Cultural Understanding, 2012, Executive Summary*

POLICY DIRECTIONS

Developing and co-ordinating system-level policies for effective adult learning, especially engaging at-risk groups, means:

- **Developing adult learners at young ages:** This means considering as an entire portfolio the range of interventions to combat low adult attainment (training programmes, school-based policies and earlier interventions). It means reducing the rate of dropout at school level and getting those young adults who do drop out of school back into second-chance opportunities as early as possible.
- **Working towards compatibility between training and employment:** In many countries, labour market programmes and the education system are independent, with few links to permit the training involved to count towards conventional qualifications. Linking the two can facilitate the move not just into work, but into more solid careers.
- **Linking adult learning to social welfare programmes:** This is an integral aspect of active programmes – to shift away from passive welfare transfers towards training alternatives which strengthen labour market prospects. The linking of adult learning and welfare benefits policies is part of this trend.



- **Collaborating with the social partners:** Admitting the social partners into decision-making processes contributes to plans and policies concerning delivery methods, and to the recognition and certification of learning. They are key to qualification systems and may be involved in actual delivery.

 *Promoting Adult Learning, 2005, Chapter 5*

Co-financing is an underpinning principle for adult learners: There is considerable evidence that adult learning benefits adults themselves as well as employers and society. There are different co-financing savings and loan schemes seeking to mirror the way that benefits are shared and to leverage individual contributions with matching contributions provided by the public authorities through individual grants or tax incentives, non-governmental organisations and/or employers. Their success depends on a number of conditions:

- **The creation of new institutional structures for co-financing and a “whole of government”** approach to ensure that public authorities provide more systemic support for financing.
- **Financing schemes need to empower individual learners to choose** what, how, where and when to learn, and where to go with their acquired skills and competences.
- **Government should concentrate its resources on those individuals least able to pay** in times of scarce resources and as the benefits of lifelong learning are widely shared.
- **Co-ordinated policy making** by public authorities and their collaboration with financial institutions, social partners and other stakeholders are required in the implementation of co-financing strategies.

 *Co-financing Lifelong Learning: Towards a Systemic Approach, 2004, Chapters 2 and 3*

Exploit the pivotal role of qualifications systems so as to promote dynamic lifelong education and training systems: Certain aspects of qualification systems should receive attention in their implications for lifelong learning implementation, including:

- **Increase flexibility and responsiveness:** Qualifications systems responsive to the changing needs of the economy, employment and the personal ambitions of individuals are “customised”, with flexibility promoted by the various mechanisms that increase choice.
- **Facilitate open access to qualifications:** Lifelong learning allows individuals to gain qualifications from different starting points, including the development of new routes to existing qualifications and calling for effective information and guidance systems.
- **Diversify assessment procedures:** Assessment methods and approaches have an important influence on the willingness of individuals to embark on a qualification; credit transfer and outcomes-based methods call for different modes of assessment.



- **Make qualifications progressive:** Accumulating learning experiences and developing competences throughout life represent a significant shift from “once and for all” initial education and training, and call for coherence in the qualifications system.

 *Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning, 2007, Chapter 2*

The OECD has identified seven interrelated areas where policy can do more to help strengthen and develop effective practice, and improve outcomes for adults who need education to address foundation skills in language, literacy and numeracy (LLN):

- **Promote active debate on the nature of teaching, learning and assessment:** Countries need open discussion about such questions as what should be the underlying principles driving provision in the adult LLN system, and what counts as success and for whom?
- **Strengthen professionalism:** Effective teaching, learning and assessment hinge on the quality of interactions between and among educators and learners; countries will need to continue to strengthen practice through rigorous qualification and professional development requirements.
- **Balance the structure and flexibility of programmes – formative assessment as a framework:** Policies should include the development of broadly-defined learning objectives, tools for community-based and work-based programmes, guidelines on the process and the principles of formative assessment, as well as appropriate professional development.
- **Strengthen learner-centred approaches:** To ensure that learners’ needs are diagnosed and addressed, individual motivations, interests and goals are incorporated into teaching, and learners may choose whether or not to pursue qualifications.
- **Diversify and deepen approaches to programme evaluation for accountability:** Given the range of stakeholder interests, no single approach can satisfy all needs. Systems that use diverse, well-aligned measures of learning processes, as well as outcomes, will be better able to manage competing goals and interests, and to capture useful data.
- **Devote the necessary resources of people, time and money:** The fragile funding and voluntary nature of much LLN provision often impedes the goals of professionalising the field and improving outcomes.
- **Strengthen the knowledge base:** There is a very large research agenda as the knowledge base remains seriously under-developed; this should include evaluations of promising teaching and assessment practices, policies and implementation, and it will need to pay much greater attention to impact.

 *Teaching, Learning and Assessment for Adults: Improving Foundation Skills, 2008, Chapter 11*



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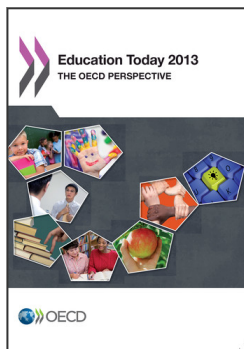
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