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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.



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”). Despite acknowledgement of its importance, holistic analyses of lifelong learning have been less a feature of OECD work 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. The ambitious Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is underway and aims to publish a powerful comparative data set on human capital in 2013. With information from 5 000 participants in each country, PIAAC will cover: 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 participated in such learning activity over a year across OECD countries as a whole (41% in 2007), even when “education” is widely understood to include short seminars, lectures or workshops. In only seven countries do around half or more of adults engage in organised learning (Finland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States). The gap is very wide between the OECD country with the highest engagement in adult learning (Sweden at 73%) and Hungary with only 9%. As these are overall averages, they hide still wider variations between adults of different ages or levels of educational attainment.

 *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators, 2010, Indicator A5*

Only 1 in 15 adults aged 30-39 is enrolled either full- or part-time in formal education in OECD countries, and students make up no more than 1.6% 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, 5.9% 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 more than 1 in 10: Australia (13.4%), Finland (15.0%), Iceland (12.8%), New Zealand (11.9%) and Sweden (12.5%). 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 (5.8%), Belgium (3.9%), Finland (3.5%), Iceland (3.9%) and New Zealand (5.2%).

 *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators, 2010, Indicator C1*

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 under 6% for adults in their thirties in formal education, there are naturally countries where the level is significantly lower. Those at half or less below the average



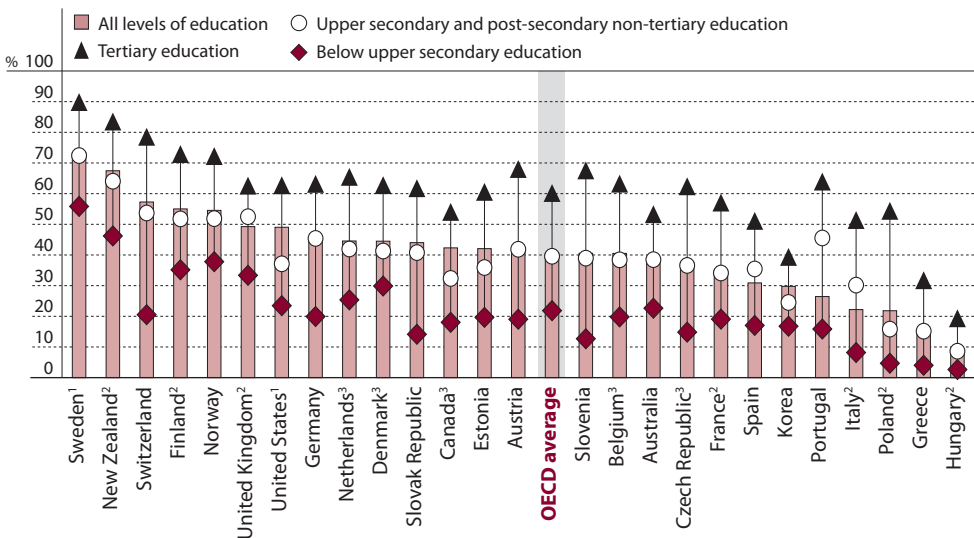
enrolment rate for 30-39 year-olds include: France (2.6%), Germany (2.5%), Korea (2.1%), Luxembourg (0.8%), the Netherlands (2.8%) and Turkey (1.8%). Lack of data prevent a number of OECD countries from making the corresponding calculations for the 40+ age group; where they can do so, 0.5% or fewer of these mature adults are in full- or part-time education in the Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Turkey.

Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators, 2010, Indicator C1

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 OECD population aged 25-64 (28%) in OECD countries participated in job-related non-formal education. The country variations are wide. The high countries at over 40% are Finland (44%), Norway (47%) and Sweden (61%), with Germany and the Slovak Republic not far behind at 38%. Less than 15% of adults participated in job-related learning in Greece (11%), Hungary (6%), Italy (14%) and Korea (11%), with Poland and Portugal also under 20%. As to be expected, participation in such forms of learning is significantly higher among those in employment (36%) than the unemployed (16%) across OECD countries as a whole, and somewhat higher among men (30%) than women (27%).

Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators, 2010, Indicator A5

Figure 5.1.
Participation in formal and/or non-formal education,
by adults aged 25-64 years-old and educational attainment (2007)



1. Year of reference 2005.

2. Year of reference 2006.


3. Year of reference 2008.

Source: OECD (2010), *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing.


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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: European Survey of Working Conditions data 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: Learning Organisations and Innovation*, forthcoming, 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 on 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

POLICY DIRECTIONS

The lifelong learning framework offers directions for policy reform to address five systemic features:

- **Improving access, quality and equity:** Gaps in access are especially clear as regards very young children and older adults at either side of the main initial education system, and these gaps need to be addressed. Access is not simply a matter of enrolment, however, and includes both the quality of the provision involved and the equity to ensure a fair and inclusive distribution of opportunities.



- **Ensuring foundation skills for all:** This requires not just universal access to basic education, but improvements in young people's motivation to learn and their capacity for independent learning. Foundation skills are also needed by those adults who lack them.
- **Recognising all forms of learning, not just formal courses of study:** Learning takes many forms and occurs in many different settings, from formal courses in schools or colleges to various types of experience in families, communities and workplaces. All types of learning need to be recognised and made visible, according to their content, quality and outcomes, rather than their location and form.
- **Mobilising resources, rethinking resource allocation across all sectors, settings and over the life-cycle:** Given that higher levels of participation increase costs, countries have used many different approaches to reduce them, especially teaching and personnel costs, rationalisation of the structure of provision, better use of ICTs, and more extensive use of the private sector.
- **Ensuring collaboration among a wide range of partners:** All lifelong learning involves stakeholders well beyond those covered by the educational authorities, and co-ordination in policy development and implementation is essential for success.


 "Lifelong Learning", *Policy Brief*, 2004

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

Make guidance more ambitious so that it aims to develop career-management skills, as well as providing information to certain groups for immediate decision making: At present, services are largely available to limited numbers of groups, at fixed points in life, focused on immediate decisions. Lifelong learning and active labour market policies call for a wider and more fundamental role in developing career management in all learners and workers through services which are universally accessible throughout the lifespan in ways, locations and at times that reflect diverse client needs.


 *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap*, 2004, Chapter 3

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:

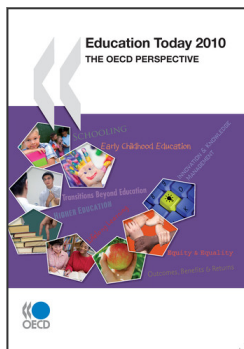
- **Increase flexibility and responsiveness:** Qualifications systems responsive to the changing needs of the economy, employment and the personal ambitions of individuals are “customised”, with flexibility promoted by the various mechanisms that increase choice.
- **Facilitate open access to qualifications:** 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*



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