

## Chapter 3

### Policy recommendations for the United States

*This chapter assesses the policy implications of the US results. It looks at why action is needed, arguing that the lack of improvement in skills in younger cohorts and the relatively weak performance at the top end of the ability spectrum suggest underlying weaknesses requiring both improvements in initial education and training and effective adult learning interventions. The chapter argues for seven policy recommendations: that concerted action is necessary to address the skills challenge; that substantial improvements are needed in initial schooling, with adequate standards for all; that effective learning pathways should be available for young adults after leaving high school; that programs to address basic skills should be linked to employability; that adult learning programs should be adapted to diverse needs and effectively coordinated with other interventions; that awareness of basic skills challenges should be increased; and that action should be well-supported with evidence.*

## The US results and the basis for policy

### *Is action needed?*

There may be some temptation to look at the results reported here as something which might be expected in a country as large, diverse and decentralized as the U.S., with a large immigrant population, and therefore not calling for any specific policy response. Although these features of the U.S. are relevant, the argument is unconvincing. Diversity cannot explain the lack of progress over time in skills and educational attainment which the U.S. displays relative to other countries, nor can it explain the two-thirds of the low-skilled population born in the U.S.

It could also be argued that the strength of the U.S. economy depends heavily on strongly-performing elites at the upper end of the skills distribution, and less on average skills levels or the proportionate size of the low-skilled population. This is a debatable point, but even if it is true, the figures provide little comfort. One of the more surprising findings of the Survey is the relatively weak US performance at the top end of the ability range. Critically, among young adults, the U.S. has fewer top performers on either literacy or numeracy than most comparison countries. These weaknesses in performance at the top as well as the bottom end of the spectrum suggest structural weaknesses in the education, training and skills system, rather than just diversity or inequity or specific challenges faced by only certain subpopulations. The policy recommendations which follow are therefore addressed at basic skills improvement across the board, alongside a necessary focus on the low-skilled, where considerations of equity are particularly salient.

### *Initial schooling and adult learning*

Among 15-year olds, the PISA exercise tells us that some countries like Korea and Finland have tackled weak basic skills very effectively (in Korea no more than 1% of students are at or below the lowest level 1b of the reading scale, compared with around 6% on average for the OECD) (OECD, 2010a). But for adults the position is different. Most countries have a lot of low-skilled adults, even the best-performing countries. The share of adults with literacy skills below Level 2 is about 5% in Japan and slightly above 10% in Finland and the Netherlands. The implication is that in countries, like Finland and Korea, the pedagogical challenges of providing basic skills to most (if not all) the population can be solved in initial schooling, despite the many learning difficulties encountered. This is almost certainly because the institutional supports, which ensure that – say – a child with poor reading skills will experience targeted interventions in an effective school system, are not similarly available for adults. In adult life, initial weaknesses may therefore drift into illiteracy and innumeracy.

This is a profoundly important message for two reasons. First it tells us that many of the challenges of helping those who struggle with basic skills at school can be solved with strong and effective schooling. Second it suggests that, in principle, it should be possible to address adult skills similarly, using targeted support for those who struggle with poor literacy and numeracy.

It has been argued, notably by Heckman, that the most cost-effective interventions are early on in life (including early childhood) and some have been led by this to suggest that interventions with adults are in relative terms unlikely to be cost-effective (see a summary of arguments in Heckman, 2008). While the value of many early interventions is well-established, and some interventions with adults have yielded disappointing results,

that is no argument for systematic despair in adult learning.<sup>1</sup> By the same token, although disease prevention is typically more cost-effective than cure, that is no argument for abandoning the search for better cures. In adult learning, as in the battle against disease, our approach should be cautious and systematic, carefully evaluating interventions. Adult learning must therefore augment initial education and training.

One further point is important here. We know that US 15-year-olds have mediocre basic skills and that these are reflected in those of young adults. This implies weaknesses in basic schooling, but the Survey yields no equivalent evidence that adult or postsecondary education in the U.S. is weaker than in other countries. Indeed the generally higher levels of participation by adults in education and training seen in the U.S. would make that argument hard to make. Clearly as adult basic skills are weak, then adult and postsecondary education in the U.S. face a greater challenge than elsewhere, but this is a separate point (and one familiar in the context of the extensive remedial activities of community colleges). The discussion which follows makes a number of recommendations bearing on adult education, but the point of departure is not one in which the US system of adult and postsecondary education is seen as weaker than some international benchmark. In that respect the recommendations bearing on adult learning have a very different tenor to those bearing on initial schooling.

### *Seven recommendations*

Seven policy recommendations are advanced below:

- concerted action is necessary to address the skills challenge;
- substantial improvements are needed in initial schooling, with adequate standards for all;
- effective learning pathways should be available for young adults after leaving high school;
- programs to address basic skills should be linked to employability;
- adult learning programs should be adapted to diverse needs, and effectively co-ordinated;
- awareness of basic skills challenges needs to be increased;
- action should be well-supported with evidence.

These recommendations are intended to provide a frame for policy rather than to drive specific policies or programs. As explained earlier, we do not set out to review or assess current adult learning policies and practices (or indeed education policy more broadly). The implementation of our recommendations would, of course, necessarily be very concerned with the concrete specifics of these policies.

## **Policy recommendations**

### *Recommendation 1: Take concerted action to improve basic skills and tackle inequities affecting sub-populations with weak skills.*

Two compelling arguments underline the priority which needs to be attached to action on basic skills – skills matter, and without action, the U.S. will fall further behind other countries.

### *Skills matter*

The basic skills of numeracy and literacy are of profound and increasing importance in working and civic life, playing a vital direct role, and supporting the development of higher level skills. For the low-skilled, the future is bleak, and if sub-populations have very weak basic skills that will create serious challenges both to equity and social cohesion. While low-skilled jobs will remain in advanced economies, they will not be abundant, and they will often be bad, insecure jobs, with low wages and poor conditions. Low skills will also limit the capacity of individuals to act as effective citizens and look after their own health. Despite extensive efforts over recent decades, large racial disparities remain in the basic skills of the adult population, with low literacy, for example, being around three or four times more common among Hispanic and black adults than among whites. These differences require specific attention, recognizing that the dynamics of low skills may be different in the different subpopulations, and require different solutions.

### *Without action, the skills of US adults will progressively fall behind other countries*

As an example of the challenge, while the basic skills profile of US adults is currently similar to that of Poland, young Poles (aged 16-24) have significantly stronger basic skills than their U.S. counterparts. This means that, other things being equal, as young cohorts replace older ones, the basic skills of the Polish workforce will progressively outpace those of the U.S. Other OECD countries are similarly poised to overtake the U.S. So unless there is a significant change of direction in the U.S., the workforce skills of other OECD countries will overtake those of the U.S. just at the moment when all OECD countries will be facing (and indeed are already facing) major and fast-increasing competitive challenges from emerging economies, including China, India and Brazil. These and other emerging economies are upskilling their labor forces with exceptional speed, as the improvements in basic schooling which have already been achieved feed through into progressively more highly skilled labor forces.

To accept relative decline in basic skills would not only mean accepting relative decline in the economic sphere, but also in other domains which depend on high levels of basic skills – in the arts and sciences and intellectual innovation, all areas in which historically the U.S. has excelled. The weaknesses in US performance at the top end of the ability spectrum underpin this point. Some degree of catch-up by previously less-developed countries is natural, but the speed at which the skills of comparable (and sometimes poorer) countries in the developed world are now outpacing the U.S. must be a matter of deep concern.

### ***Recommendation 2: Strengthen initial schooling for all, ensuring that all children receive an adequate standard of education, with effective interventions to support the basic skills of those in difficulty.***

Chapter 2 argued that many basic skills weaknesses in the U.S. are attributable to weaknesses in schooling. Getting basic schooling right is always important, but it is particularly significant in the U.S. for three reasons. First, relative to most other OECD countries, the US population is younger and so changes made at school level have a greater and faster impact on the adult workforce than elsewhere. Second, the evidence, from PISA, augmented by the current Survey of Adult Skills, suggests a significant challenge in schooling quality which needs to be addressed. Third, the evidence from

PISA also suggests that successful education systems can effectively tackle the majority of basic skills weaknesses that are found in 15-year-olds. A special OECD report (OECD, 2011) provides lessons from key countries for reform of the US school system.

One of the functions of initial education is to provide a consistent and supportive learning environment for all citizens, compensating for variations and weaknesses in home background, and therefore making the development of basic skills more independent of the accidents of birth. In the U.S., the unusually strong linkage between adult basic skills and socio-economic background suggest that the initial education system has been less successful than those of other countries in achieving this leveling objective. One potential reason is that school resources in the U.S. are much more dependent on local district resources than in most OECD countries, meaning that the most disadvantaged communities have some of the most weakly resourced schools (recognizing that there are sometimes compensating mechanisms). US school outcomes in terms of high school graduation may also hide some real weaknesses in the schooling system, given the evidence reported here that those with high school education or less have fewer basic skills than their counterparts in many other countries. Much could be achieved by ensuring common standards and resourcing across the school system.

One of the strongest arguments for interventions in initial education, and for young adults, is that the positive impacts will extend to the next generation (see for example OECD, 2010b). While US children in poverty exhibit a substantial vocabulary deficit even in their first three years of life (Hart and Risley, 2003), parental engagement helps improve children's school results and fosters positive attitudes and behavior (e.g. Gonzalez-Pienda et al., 2002; George and Kaplan, 1998; Catsambis, 2001; Feinstein and Symons, 1999). This is consistent with international evidence. Results from PISA collected in over a dozen of countries show that activities like reading books to children when they start primary school or talking with adolescents about topical social issues are positively associated with test scores at age 15 (OECD, 2012a).

A particular challenge surrounds high school completion. While a generation ago the U.S. had one of the highest levels of high school completion in the world, completion rates then barely rose until the last decade, allowing many other OECD countries to outpace the U.S. One US high school student in five still leaves without a diploma, more than in most OECD countries (OECD, 2012b). Cunha et al. (2006) suggest that mentoring and social programs can improve outcomes in terms of schooling, earnings and crime. Heckman (2000) and Heckman and Lochner (2000) show that programs aiming to prevent drop-out can be effective. Tackling the completion challenge is crucial, particularly given a high school system which, unlike many European countries, contains very limited direct career preparation, as high school dropouts and even graduates face a very difficult labor market. Career preparation mostly takes place later on in postsecondary programs (such as certificates) typically requiring a high school degree. The high school diploma is therefore seen as an educational minimum, and by the same token, the lack of a diploma is a serious disadvantage in the labor market.

***Recommendation 3: Ensure effective and accessible education opportunities for young adults, using the strengths of the community college system to support and develop basic skills and offer substantive career options.***

One-third of all low-skilled adults in the U.S. are under 35, and simple arithmetic determines that the lifetime impact of successful interventions will be greater for younger

adults. As argued above, successful interventions with young adults who are parents will have positive intergenerational returns.

In the U.S., a strong system of community colleges permits many young adults to return to education. The colleges provide an extensive range of programs, including basic skills, which seek to remedy some of the skills weaknesses found in high school graduates. Much effort also goes into the development of occupation-specific skills – not measured in the Survey, but potentially very important. While many obtain valuable qualifications, others drop out – often because of basic skills weaknesses – and/or become burdened with debt. So this very important postsecondary mechanism does not always fully realize its potential. The OECD’s recent review of postsecondary vocational education and training in the U.S. examines these and other challenges, and advances recommendations designed to improve quality and attainment in postsecondary occupational programs (see Box 3.1). Box 3.2 describes the Swedish approach to adult education and dropout.

### **Box 3.1 Key messages from the OECD review of postsecondary career and technical education**

The report recommends that the U.S. should strategically pursue more quality, coherence and transparency in the U.S. postsecondary system. This should help deliver the skills training and credentials needed to build employer confidence, support student success and maintain the global standing of the US workforce.

Specific recommendations include:

- Substantially strengthen quality assurance in postsecondary education and its links to Title IV student aid.
- Establish a quality standard for industry credentials (especially certifications).
- Develop workplace training as a standard element in postsecondary career and technical programs.
- Systematically develop and support prior learning assessment both as a means of encouraging adults to return to postsecondary education, and because of its wider benefits.
- Ensure that postsecondary students have sufficient information and career guidance.

*Source:* Kuczera, M. and S. Field (2013), *A Skills beyond School Review of the United States*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264202153-en>

The high level of participation in adult education and training in the U.S. should represent the means for young people who dropped out to return to education later on, but the level of provision is highly variable. While measuring how need compares to actual provision is hard, one potential indicator is the ratio of adults lacking basic prose literacy skills (an indicator of need) to those enrolled in state-administered adult education (an indicator of provision).<sup>2</sup> In Minnesota, Utah, Florida and South Carolina this ratio is between five and seven; in New Jersey, the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, New York and Texas it is about 25 (see Table F.24). These figures need to be interpreted with great caution for any number of reasons, but they do give some flavor of the variation in provision.

### Box 3.2 Adult education and dropout in Sweden

Affordable and easily accessible adult education courses partly explain low graduation rates in Sweden, since the cost of dropping out from a regular high school is relatively low. Adult education is open to those who have not completed primary and secondary education and leads to a qualification that is equivalent to that provided within “regular” education. Adult education is free and people who are over 20 and study at least half-time can apply for grants and loans. Among those who were 20 years old in 2011, 65% received a grant while 13% received a grant and a loan.

In 2011, 24 thousand persons without a high school diploma were enrolled in adult education institutions in Sweden compared to 350 thousand in the regular upper secondary education system. 90% of those in adult education were 24 or below. While dropping out and then returning imposes an extra cost on society by delaying the transition of young people to work, it also provides a valuable second chance safety network.

*Source:* Centre for Introduction to Swedish Society in Stockholm County (2013), *Adult Education and Folk High School*, <http://nyistockholm.se/engelska/undersida-till-engelska/jobs-and-education/adult-education/komvux-och-folkhogskola/>; Statistics Sweden (2012), *Population 16-64 Years of Age by Sex, Age, Type of Studies The Autumn Term, Level of Educational Attainment and Use of Student Grants During The Autumn Term. Year 1993 – 2011*, [www.scb.se/Pages/SSD/SSD\\_TreeView.aspx?id=340506](http://www.scb.se/Pages/SSD/SSD_TreeView.aspx?id=340506)

***Recommendation 4: Link efforts to improve basic skills to employability, recognizing that good jobs open up further learning options, while basic skills can often be more readily acquired in practical contexts.***

#### *At high school*

At school, weaknesses in basic skills are often linked to disengagement from academic forms of learning, so additional drilling in math and literacy may not be the most effective response. More practically oriented career and technical education (CTE) programs, linked to work-based learning, can be effective in developing not only vocational but also basic skills. In particular, career preparation and basic skills development can be linked in integrated models. In the U.S. the Math-in-CTE model illustrates the potential of this approach. The model involved CTE lessons with math integrated into the occupational curriculum and extensive teamwork between math and CTE teachers. Students did better on the math test without compromising occupational learning (Stone, Alfeld and Pearson, 2008). This integrated approach requires careful planning and teamwork, but the potential benefits are large, and could help raise high school completion rates by engaging students who are less keen on academic forms of learning.

The integration of basic skills and career preparation would benefit both those who pursue postsecondary studies right after high school and those who do not. For those who do not enter postsecondary education immediately upon completing high school, the element of career preparation would give them a better chance of succeeding in the labor market. Many other OECD countries provide high school options which include education and training preparing for specific jobs for those who start work right after high school.

*In adult learning, integrate basic skills improvement with career preparation and work-based learning.*

For someone in mid-life, where weak basic skills are so often found in association with other social disadvantages, improved basic skills may on their own not provide sufficient impetus to change someone's career path.<sup>3</sup> Even before the economic crisis, in many countries policies on adult learning were already shifting to emphasize employability. Enhanced employability through basic skills education and career preparation could help low-skilled adults into a self-sustaining trajectory. The perspective of a particular career can help engage adults in learning and transition them into jobs. Those jobs can in turn be a springboard for further learning and career development.

Khatiwada et al. (2007) estimate that by strengthening basic skills proficiencies and educational attainment, adult basic education can improve the fiscal position of federal, state and local governments. To achieve this, basic education programs must enhance the employability and earnings of adults.<sup>4</sup> But the benefits of employment go beyond the economy, with much research suggesting that successful entry into employment is a key step in tackling social inclusion (e.g. Grove, 1999; Van Dongen, 1996; Bolton and Oatley, 1987; Coleman, Ellis and Smith, 1998). Employment enhances self-esteem, develops wider social relationships, improves health outcomes and provides a foundation for further learning and career development.

For adults as for high school students, integrating basic skills teaching with career preparation, and work-based learning if possible, provides a powerful tool to enhance both basic skills and more broadly, employability. Box 3.3 describes two programs that integrate basic skills with occupational training. The U.S. is a leader among OECD countries in developing, implementing and evaluating such approaches.

Given that two-thirds of the low-skilled are in work, employers have an important potential role in addressing low skills. In other OECD countries, employers are sometimes encouraged through public policy programs and incentives to train their workforces. But such programs are relatively unusual in the U.S. The key element is to help employers to see basic skills and other forms of training as being in their own interests as employers, allowing them to make more demands on their workers, rather than as something which merely offers an exit route for their workers into other jobs.



### Box 3.3 Example of integrated instruction

#### I-BEST

The Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) provides a strong example of a program designed to improve labor market outcomes and entry rates to postsecondary career programs among adults with low basic skills. The program, developed in Washington State, has proved successful and is now being introduced in other parts of the country. An I-BEST program combines basic skills teaching and professional training. Occupational training yields college credits and contributes to a certificate credential. These courses can only be provided in occupations in high demand (Wachen et al., 2010). I-BEST programs are available in every community and technical college (WTECB, 2013). Individuals must score below a certain threshold on an adult skill test and qualify for adult basic education to participate in the program (Wachen et al, 2010).

Studies measuring the impact of I-BEST in Washington State found that I-BEST students earn more credits and are more likely to complete a program than a comparable group of students not participating in the program. Evidence on the link between participation in I-BEST and earnings is less conclusive (Jenkins et al, 2010).

*Source:* Kuczera, M. and S. Field (2013), *A Skills beyond School Review of the United States*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing.  
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264202153-en>

#### LaGuardia’s Bridge to Health and Business Program

The GED Bridge program was designed as a pathway to college and careers, targeting low-income individuals in New York City who did not have a high school diploma or a GED. It includes more hours in class than typical GED programs, as well as intensive advising from full-time Bridge staff. Contextualized curriculum is the foundation of the program, which aims to develop skills tested on the GED exam through career-related content (health or business). The program also aims to foster general academic habits and skills that prepare students for postsecondary education.

The results of the random assignment evaluation of the program are promising: participants in the GED Bridge program were more likely to complete the semester of classes, pass the GED exam and enroll in college than those who enrolled in a more traditional GED program.

*Source:* MDRC (2013), “New study shows LaGuardia Community College’s GED Bridge Program significantly boosts GED pass rates and college enrollment”, MDRC press release May 2013, [www.mdrc.org/news/press-release/new-study-shows-laguardia-community-college%E2%80%99s-ged-bridge-program-significantly](http://www.mdrc.org/news/press-release/new-study-shows-laguardia-community-college%E2%80%99s-ged-bridge-program-significantly) (accessed September 2013)

***Recommendation 5: Adapt to diversity. Adapt adult learning programs to better respond to the diverse challenges of different groups with different needs. Work across all levels of government and across the public and private sectors to achieve better outcomes at all ages and stages.***

Over a lifetime, the causes and effects of weak basic skills are complex and many-layered. Weak basic skills may emerge from a culturally impoverished background, from a learning disability, from poor schooling, or from life experiences and working lives which have not supported the development of basic skills. Causes and effects will often be mutually reinforcing, entrenching whole sets of disadvantages of which weak basic skills will be no more than a component. Those with weak basic skills will inevitably have less access to further education, fewer job opportunities, particularly in relation to jobs that allow for skills development. Given the diversity of groups facing basic skills challenges, and the multiple causes involved, it may make little sense to search for interventions with very wide application. Such a course might represent the equivalent of seeking a common therapy for all patients who present themselves in the doctor's office complaining of fatigue.

Although weak basic skills are very much part of the problem, it does not necessarily follow that teaching basic skills, particularly in isolation from other reinforcing interventions, will be only solution or the most effective solution. A virtuous cycle of improvement is only possible if it can rely on policy coherence across different areas, including the social safety net.<sup>5</sup> Typically basic skills are the domain of education while workforce development programs are managed by labor departments. Interventions designed to help low-skilled adults need to be carefully coordinated, both locally and nationally across government agencies, avoiding duplication and ensuring the most cost-effective blend of interventions.

To improve co-ordination between services for adult learners the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services have adopted a common career pathways approach (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Career/Technical Education Statistics, 2013). The goal is to facilitate simultaneous development of basic and labor market skills among adult learners and recognition of these skills within a formal education system. Other countries have also recognized the importance of a coordinated nationwide effort to enhance basic skills (see Box 3.4).

### Box 3.4 The Australian National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults

This 10 year National Strategy was developed by Australian governments following results from the 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Survey, which found that 44% of working-age Australians have literacy and numeracy skills below Level 3 – the level needed to meet the demands of work and life in modern economies. The National Strategy sets a target that by 2022 two-thirds of working age Australians will have literacy and numeracy skills at Level 3 or above. Results from the International Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) will be the benchmark for this target.

Four priorities for action have been set: raising awareness and commitment to action; adult learners having high quality learning opportunities and outcomes; strengthening foundation skills in the workplace; and building the capacity of the education and training workforces to deliver foundation skills.

For each priority, the strategy specifies objectives, indicators of success, and actions at national, jurisdictional and systemic level. The principles underpinning the strategy are collaboration and co-ordination; equitable access to and increased participation in learning; and a stronger research base.

*Source:* Standing Council on Tertiary Education Skills & Employment (SCOTESE) (2012), *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*, [www.scotese.natese.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/71755/National\\_Foundation\\_Skills\\_Strategy\\_for\\_Adults.pdf](http://www.scotese.natese.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/71755/National_Foundation_Skills_Strategy_for_Adults.pdf)

There is some evidence of unmet need for adult education: looking at low-skilled adults, around 3 million of them said that they wanted to undertake adult education but did not do so. This represents one in five of those not currently participating in adult education. Among those already participating, two in five said they wanted to participate *more*. For those who do engage in some sort of adult learning, persistence is often a major challenge. The National Research Council (2012) reports low completion rates for developmental education courses in college, low persistence rates in adult education programs and high attrition rates in research studies on learning among adults with low and mid-level skills.

Although better basic skills can be a route to improved life chances, that same route may appear to the learner as unclear and obstacle-ridden. Adequate guidance and support can help: research suggests that developing learning plans and a path toward longer term goals can support persistence in adult learning (Comings, 2007; National Research Council, 2012). Other studies (e.g. Comings, 2007; National Research Council, 2012; Portland State University, 2010) suggest policy programs to improve persistence (e.g. instruction accessible from home, financial support and incentives). Given multiple barriers (such as lack of awareness of weak basic skills, financial constraints, family responsibilities) the simple offer of basic skills instruction may have limited impact, and is best complemented with programs that support enrollment and completion.

***Recommendation 6: Build awareness of the implications of weak basic skills among adults, their links with other social factors, and the need to tackle this challenge in the interests of all.***

A shared understanding of both the size of the problem and the consequences of inaction are necessary to its solution. As argued above, tackling the challenge will require

the engagement of multiple stakeholders, ranging from governments and the private sector, through parents and families, to schools and local communities, across the public and private sectors, and this will in turn require a shared understanding of the challenge. To this end, much can be gained by disseminating information and promoting public discussion, stimulating interest and building consensus about the need to invest in skills.

Building awareness of the implications of weak basic skills is also important for the adults directly concerned, and their immediate contacts – employers, family and friends. Research shows that adults are often unable or unwilling to recognize their own basic skills weaknesses. In the U.S. 40% of adults scoring at Level 1 in literacy evaluate their English reading skills as good or very good. Even when adults do recognize their own weaknesses, they may face significant obstacles to engaging in learning, or for understandable reasons want to avoid the classroom settings where in the past they experienced failure. This calls for an approach which goes beyond simply responding to expressed demand, but emphasizes the need to reach out to those who may have weak skills, to raise awareness of the issues, and the scope for individuals to improve their skills through learning initiatives. This will require working through the bodies that have direct contact with the adults concerned, including employers, schools and non-profit organisations. Such activation of latent demand is always challenging, but will be substantially assisted by greater public awareness and discussion.

***Recommendation 7: Support action with evidence. Build on US excellence in research and data-gathering to construct evidence-based policies and programs.***

Good data are a precondition for well-targeted and effective interventions. While knowing “what works” in adult education is critical, international evidence is meager. Much research has focused on policy tools, with less analysis of outcomes (NALA, 2011). Some programs have been evaluated (see Box 3.5), but reviews of the research literature on adult basic skill interventions (e.g. Beder, 1999; Torgerson et al., 2004) argue that a surprising majority of evaluation studies have serious methodological flaws. Similarly, the European Commission (2006) argues that failure to provide rigorous demonstrations of the benefits of adult learning is a significant weakness in the field.

The U.S. is clearly a leader in the quality of evaluation evidence available. A review found far more studies in the U.S. than in other countries (only two out of 36 studies were not conducted in the U.S.) (Torgerson et al., 2004), and the US studies include random assignment exercises (for example the evaluation of Job Corps by Long, Maller and Thornton, 1981; and of the GED Bridge program by MDRC, 2013. Other US studies provide useful information on adult skills development, the causal factors and outcomes (e.g. the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning, Portland State University, 2010). Consistent with the commendable evidence-based approach, federal legislation provides a funding stream used to give technical assistance to states and promote evidence-based practice. The U.S. should build on its existing strengths in this area.

### Box 3.5 Examples of adult learning programs

#### **The Knowledge Lift Program – Sweden. 1997-2002**

This program aimed to raise the skills of poorly educated workers (equivalent to those without high school) to medium level (about high school level). It had a particular focus on the unemployed, and sought to improve basic skills (Swedish, English, mathematics), but participants could also follow vocational courses or pursue a work placement. They were eligible, depending on their circumstances, for income grants and other financial support programs.

The program increased enrollment in adult education by about 80%. An evaluation, based on matched longitudinal data sets, found a positive employment effect for young men, but did not find an effect on all participants.

*Source:* Albrecht, J., G.J. Van den Berg, and S. Vroman (2005), *The Knowledge Lift: the Swedish Adult Education Program That Aimed to Eliminate Low Worker Skill Levels*.

#### **Noste Program – Finland. 2003-2009**

This program was designed to raise attainment and improve the employment and career prospects of low-educated adults (primarily those aged 30 to 59). It provided learning opportunities towards a comprehensive school qualification, a general or vocational high school qualification, and other vocational and work-related training programs. Funding was provided to local projects that provided enrollment, instruction, examinations and other support programs. Apart from examination fees, students could complete the program free of charge. A particular feature of the program was that it encouraged education providers to engage in outreach activities. Tripartite collaboration, involving employer, employee and education providers, were particularly successful in encouraging participation.

Graduates and workplace representatives reported that the studies increased professional competences and motivation, as well as enhancing self-esteem and a sense of security in working life, even though graduates did not typically find a new job or receive higher wages. The evaluation concluded that guidance and support programs and efforts to improve learning skills were very important for the least educated adults. The program helped increase awareness among teaching staff and providers improved their ability to identify and address the needs of students.

*Source:* Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland (2010), Noste Programme 2003-2009, [www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Julkaisut/2010/liitteet/okm08.pdf?lang=fi](http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Julkaisut/2010/liitteet/okm08.pdf?lang=fi)

#### **Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program – Australia**

The aim of the WELL Program is to assist organizations to train workers in literacy and numeracy skills. Funding is available on a competitive grant basis to organizations for English language and literacy training linked to job-related workplace training. *Training projects* target workers who need to improve their basic skills to remain or progress in employment. *Resource projects* fund the development and trialing of specific training materials, industry relevant language, literacy and numeracy assessment and reporting methods, as well as professional development resources for industry trainers/assessors. *Strategic projects* cover activities with a national scope to support workplace English, language, literacy and numeracy training across one or more industry sectors.

78% of employers considered WELL effective in meeting their business needs, and 79% found that their employee's job performance improved as a result. 80% of employers reported that, after the training, employees participated in additional work-related training that was directly supported by skills acquired through WELL. Employees themselves considered the ability to participate in further training the most important benefit of the program. The program also seems to have improved general employability skills and career prospects.

*Source:* Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (2013), *Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL)* [www.innovation.gov.au/skills/LiteracyAndNumeracy/WorkplaceEnglishLanguageAndLiteracy/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.innovation.gov.au/skills/LiteracyAndNumeracy/WorkplaceEnglishLanguageAndLiteracy/Pages/default.aspx)

## Notes

1. Cunha et al. (2006) provide an extensive discussion of skill formation over the lifecycle with a review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions at different ages.
2. This ratio is defined as the number of adults who scored Below Basic in prose and those who could not be tested due to language barriers on the National Assessment of Adult Literacy in 2003 divided by the number of adults enrolled in a state-administered adult education program.
3. The situation of the incarcerated population is a striking example of this point. A large proportion of the between two and three million incarcerated persons have weak basic skills. The vast majority (95%) of these adults return to US communities (Erisman and Contardo, 2005). With most of those near release are aged less than 40, many will continue to be of working age for decades (Amodeo, Jin and Kling, 2009). For this group, programs which increase not only basic skills but also employability are clearly central to efforts at rehabilitation.
4. The paper analyzed the net annual fiscal contributions (tax payments minus cash and in-kind transfers and institutionalization costs) of US adults aged 16-64 by their educational attainment.
5. For example, poor adults who obtain a job, even a low-wage one, may lose access to subsidized childcare, health insurance, transportation, housing, cash supports and food stamps. The risk is that low wages combined with losing such support may drive adults back out of employment. So if the objective is to help adults into employment, policies in all relevant areas must ensure that adults do gain when they find a job. This may require, for example, reconsideration of support programs, such as transitional supports to assist adults while working towards stable, family-supporting wages.

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**From:**  
**Time for the U.S. to Reskill?**  
What the Survey of Adult Skills Says

**Access the complete publication at:**  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264204904-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

OECD (2013), "Policy recommendations for the United States", in *Time for the U.S. to Reskill?: What the Survey of Adult Skills Says*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264204904-5-en>

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