


Chapter 5

Adult Education and Training – Participation and Provision


With agreement on the importance of lifelong learning in OECD and by countries, it is natural that adult participation in education and training has been a focus of statistical work and of programme and policy analysis. The international data show how, for many countries, participation in formal education remains a rare occurrence for older adults, with very wide differences between countries in engagement in non-formal organised learning. The Nordic countries are near the top of most comparisons of participation and engagement. The OECD has conducted international reviews – the most recent published in 2005 – bringing together the education and employment perspectives, of provision and policies for adult learning, with complementary studies on qualifications, ageing, and financing.

5.1. Key findings and conclusions

Over 1 in 20 adults aged 30-39 are enrolled full- or part-time in formal education in OECD countries, as are 1.4% 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, 5.7% of the 30-39 age population 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 in Australia (13.8%), Finland (13.8%), Iceland (12.5%), New Zealand (12.3%), and Sweden (13.2%). 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 (5.9%), Belgium (3.7%), Finland (3.2%), Iceland (3.4%), New Zealand (5.1%), and Sweden (3.0%).

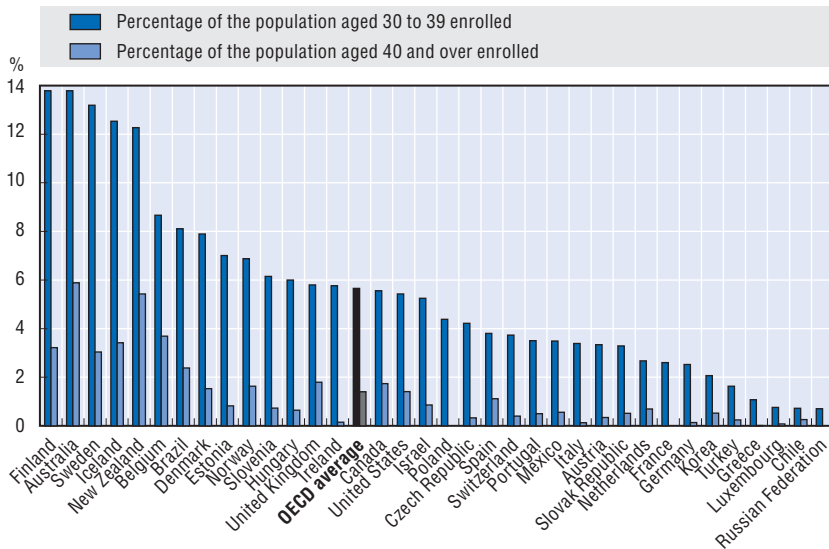
 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition, Chapter C.*

There are countries where to be enrolled in education as an older adult remains a 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%), Greece (1.1%), Korea (2.1%), Luxembourg (0.8%), the Netherlands (2.7%), and Turkey (1.6%). Lack of data prevents 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 Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Luxembourg, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Switzerland and Turkey.


 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition, Chapter C.*

The chances of a working-age adult participating in job-related non-formal education and training during a year is less than 1 in 5 (18%), is slightly higher for men, and much higher for tertiary graduates: Across the OECD as a whole (based on 22 countries in 2003), 18% of 25-64-year-olds participated in organised job-related learning outside the formal education system, with men having a slightly higher chance (19%) of doing so than women (17%). Adults who have been through tertiary education are much more likely to have been involved in such job-related learning during the year at nearly a third (31%), women tertiary graduates even more so (32%). Those with upper secondary attainment


Figure 5.1. **Adults enrolled in education (2006)**
Percentage of the populations aged 30-39 years and 40 and older
enrolled in formal education



Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2008 Edition*, OECD Publishing, Paris.


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are approximately at the same level on this indicator as the average for all people combined (17% compared with 18%). The very big drop is seen with working-age adults who have only been through schooling at the lower secondary level: for them, only 7% will do job-related organised learning during the year, and for women it is a mere 6%.


 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2007 Edition*, Chapter C.

Adults are most likely to undertake job-related, non-formal education in three Nordic countries and the United States, plus France and Switzerland when the measure is lifetime training hours: Denmark (39%), Finland (36%), Sweden (40%), and the United States (37%) lead the way with a third or more of working-age adults participating in such learning in 2003 over the course of the preceding year. In all these cases, women are more likely to have done so than men, though in Denmark there is an even gender balance. Taking expected hours in training over the typical working life partly modifies the leading countries – Denmark, Finland and Sweden still feature but also Switzerland and France at over 600 lifetime hours, with Canada close behind. The advantage of tertiary graduates in job-related learning is clear, with their average expected hours exceeding 1 000 hours in Denmark, Finland, France, and Switzerland. Unlike the two Nordic


countries, male graduates hold the advantage over females in France and, especially, Switzerland (1 422 hours for male as against 1 085 hours for female graduates).

 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2007 Edition, Chapter C.*

Compared with the overall 18% of adults engaging in non-formal job-related training during the year, in 7 out of the 22 countries (with data) participation rates are at half of or below this OECD average: Engagement in organised non-formal, job-related learning remains a relatively infrequent matter in a number of OECD countries. Of the 22 supplying data, in 7 of them the participation rate during the previous year stood at 9% or less in Greece (4%), Hungary (4%), Italy (4%), the Netherlands (9%), Poland (9%), Portugal (7%), and Spain (6%). For tertiary graduates in two of these – Poland (29%) and Portugal (27%) – the rates was well above the overall OECD average combining all levels of educational background meaning that there are very wide gaps in training take-up between tertiary graduates and other workers; in the others, even tertiary graduates are below the 18% global average.


 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2007 Edition, Chapter C.*

Surveys show that adults’ participation in organised learning is consistently among the highest in the Nordic countries, and that participation declines with age and for the poorly qualified: Comparing national participation rates in adult learning as a whole is problematic because different surveys use different methodologies, time reference periods, and range of relevant learning experiences. Drawing on primarily European data (plus Korea and the United States) in 17 countries, country rankings give broadly similar results across different surveys. Denmark, Finland and Sweden rank highest in most, followed by the United Kingdom and Switzerland while Hungary, Portugal and Poland tend to be at the other end of the spectrum. Surveys find that education and adult learning are complementary and that the participation of 25-34-year-olds is often twice or more compared with 55-64-year-olds, and much more than this in countries where overall participation is lowest.


 *Promoting Adult Learning, 2005, Chapter 1.*

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 key 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; *Co-financing Lifelong Learning: Towards a Systemic Approach*, 2004.

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 ageing 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.

5.2. Orientations for policy


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. The partners are key to qualification systems, and may be involved in actual delivery.

 *Promoting Adult Learning*, 2005, Chapter 5.

Shaping a coherent adult learning system requires adapted institutions for policy formulation and programme delivery and/or the setting of clear policy priorities and targets: Countries with high participation rates, such as the United Kingdom and some Nordic countries, have adopted either one or both approaches concurrently. Co-ordination institutions contribute through establishing priorities, defining appropriate financial incentives to increase adult participation, providing information and guidance, and improving the quality of provision through involving the different partners. Defining targets, on the other hand, can be an effective way of getting a diverse range of actors to work towards common goals.


 *Promoting Adult Learning*, 2005, Chapter 5.

Against the backdrop of the over-arching importance of lifelong learning, four key conclusions emerged from the 2003 OECD **co-financing lifelong learning policy** conference:


- Adequate financing of lifelong learning depends on **the creation of new institutional structures** to support financing schemes, 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 to enable them to exercise choice in deciding where to go with their acquired skills and competences.
- Lifelong learning must be **co-financed**, because government cannot shoulder the burden alone, and because the benefits of lifelong learning are

widely shared; **government should concentrate its resources on those individuals least able to pay.**

- **Co-ordinated policy-making** by public authorities, and their collaboration with financial institutions, social partners and other stakeholders, are required in order to make further progress in the development and implementation of co-financing strategies.

 *Co-financing Lifelong Learning: Towards a Systemic Approach*, 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. In order to minimise the risk of under-investment, many countries have experimented with co-financing savings and loan schemes that mirror the way benefits are shared. Matching individual contributions have been provided by the public authorities through individual grants or tax incentives, non-governmental organisations, and/or employers. Examples are found in many countries including Canada, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. It is an open question whether the resources provided really stimulate net new learning activity or whether they subsidise learning that would have occurred anyway.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Chapter 1. Early Childhood Education and Care	9
1.1. Key findings and conclusions	10
1.2. Orientations for policy	14
Chapter 2. Schooling – Investments, Organisation, and Learners	17
2.1. Key findings and conclusions	18
2.2. Orientations for policy	25
Chapter 3. Transitions beyond Initial Education	31
3.1. Key findings and conclusions	32
3.2. Orientations for policy	36
Chapter 4. Higher Education	39
4.1. Key findings and conclusions	40
4.2. Orientations for policy	45
Chapter 5. Adult Education and Training – Participation and Provision	51
5.1. Key findings and conclusions	52
5.2. Orientations for policy	55
Chapter 6. Lifelong Learning	59
6.1. Key findings and conclusions	60
6.2. Orientations for policy	62
Chapter 7. Outcomes, Benefits and Returns	65
7.1. Key findings and conclusions	66
7.2. Orientations for policy	74
Chapter 8. Equity and Equality of Opportunity	77
8.1. Key findings and conclusions	78
8.2. Orientations for policy	82
Chapter 9. Innovation and Knowledge Management	87
9.1. Key findings and conclusions	88
9.2. Orientations for policy	89
Bibliography	93
List of tables	
1.1. Main forms of funding for early childhood education and care services	12

List of figures

1.1.	Most children come into education well before the age of 5 years (2006)	10
2.1.	Spending per school student going up.	20
2.2.	Total number of intended instruction hours in public institutions between the ages of 7 and 14 (2006)	21
3.1.	Completion of upper secondary education is now the norm across OECD countries	34
3.2.	Expected years in education and not in education for 15-to-29-year-olds (2006)	35
4.1.	Population that has attained at least tertiary education (2006)	40
4.2.	Distribution of foreign students in tertiary education, by country of destination (2006)	43
5.1.	Adults enrolled in education (2006)	53
6.1.	Expected time in education for 5-year-olds based on current enrolment patterns (2004)	61
7.1.	Percentages in each PISA proficiency level in science (2006)	67
7.2.	Percentages in each PISA proficiency level in mathematics (2006)	68
7.3.	Percentages in each PISA proficiency level in reading (2006)	68
7.4.	Earnings from employment by level of educational attainment for 25-to-64-years-olds by gender, 2006 or latest available year	71
8.1.	Women have overtaken men in upper secondary and higher education attainments, as shown by attainments of different age groups in the adult population in 2006	80
8.2.	Mathematics performance by migration status in 2003	80

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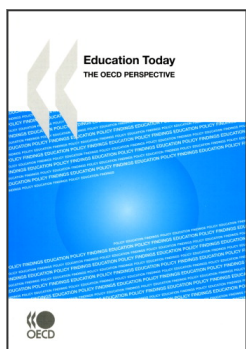


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