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DESIRABLE FEATURES OF ADULT LEARNING SYSTEMS

8.1. The increasing policy-relevance of adult learning

Over the past decade or so, the issue of adult learning has attracted considerable interest among policy makers and society at large. Of course, the issue is not new. Many OECD countries have long traditions of formal structures for adult learning. For example, in Scandinavian countries the folk high school has been an established institution for 150 years. In the United Kingdom, workers' education associations developed in the 19th century. In Canada, agricultural extension programmes started at the end of the 19th century. In Switzerland, Migros "club schools" sprang from the current of social idealism of the 1920s. In some cases the state has assumed responsibility for both organising and funding such services. In other cases they have been organised by non-government associations with individuals meeting at least part of the costs of tuition. Adult learning services such as these have often been propounded on two grounds: to provide a means for individual, cultural and social improvement; and to address inequities in access to initial education.

These arguments continue to be used to support adult learning as a focus of public policy, and they have helped to develop much of the culture and traditions of the adult education movement in many OECD countries. The Adult Education Initiative in Sweden is a good example of public support to provide upper secondary education to adults who lacked basic educational attainment. Alongside these traditions, public intervention in adult learning has also been propounded on the basis of a need to address labour market problems. The need to adapt workers' skills and competencies to changing labour market requirements and to meet specific skill shortages has led to training programmes for adults becoming an important component of employment policies in many OECD countries. The adult vocational training system (AMU system) in Denmark is a good example of a public provider meeting these challenges. In some countries, public policy has attempted to stimulate the amount of training provided by and within enterprises because the enterprise is the most common learning venue. In addition, training programmes have focused upon developing the skills and the long-term employability of the unemployed as a key component of active labour market policies (ALMPs). The vocational training programme for the unemployed organised by the National Employment Institute in Spain is an example of these ALMPs.

Moreover, recent studies have found a strong link between investment in human capital (of which adult learning is a part) and economic growth. Altogether, the emerging reconsideration of the place of adult learning in public policy, of which this thematic review is a sign, has come from a number of sources:

Personal development, cultural development and equity are traditionally used to argue for a public role in adult learning.

Changing labour market requirements and the need to respond to unemployment and to the challenges of the knowledge-based society are major new justifications.

A reconsideration of adult learning policy is being driven by a number of forces.

- A growing body of evidence helps to highlight the role that the overall education level of the inhabitants of a country plays in economic growth (OECD, 2000; OECD, 2001a; OECD, 2001b).
- Many OECD governments have become aware that they must find ways to maintain labour market dynamism and flexibility in the face of ageing populations, and that addressing the adult skills base is one key to this. Indeed, training throughout the entire working life may help workers stay longer in the labour market.
- As OECD economies increasingly become knowledge-based, individuals' capacity for continual renewal of their knowledge and qualifications, in the face of constant technological innovation and structural changes, becomes one key to national economic growth and competitiveness.
- There now seems to be a clear agreement among OECD policy makers that a lack of basic skills of the sort revealed by the International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000) may impinge on the well-being of the population and the issues related to democracy and citizenship. This view emerged clearly in the national consultations undertaken during the thematic review.

8.2. The challenges ahead: improving equity and efficiency in provision

Yet, participation remains uneven...

Though the importance of the issue is increasingly acknowledged, the fact is that participation in adult learning remains markedly unequal across groups. Those with higher levels of initial educational attainment benefit the most from further education and training. Those who work in large firms or the service sector and have a white-collar, high-skilled occupation are more likely to be involved in learning activities. Younger adults and those living in an urban area are more likely to enter learning programmes.

... delivery is highly fragmented, and multiple actors are involved.

In most of the countries that have taken part in the thematic review, adult learning is provided by many different suppliers. Moreover, the adoption of lifelong learning policies has resulted in the emergence of new providers, shifting towards a more demand-driven market. There is a tendency for private providers to take over the training of high-skilled adults and for community-based providers to deal with leisure and recreational programmes, leaving government to act as a provider of adult basic education and training for disadvantaged groups. There are exceptions. In Sweden, for example, adult education is provided free of charge to individuals who want to undertake any type of learning activity, from basic adult education to advanced education and training.

As a result, programme visibility is poor and there are few evaluation studies of what works and does not in adult learning policies.

Such highly segmented provision results in poor visibility: for learners, for employers and for other customers. Associated with poor visibility, delivery of adult learning is often notable for the absence of appropriate support services such as day care, advice and guidance. A related problem is the fact that the knowledge base for adult learning systems is not always sufficient to support policy development and programme implementation. Data on key issues such as participation, financing and outcomes are weak. More generally, there are few evaluation studies on what works and what does not in adult learning policies. Most available evaluations are dogmatic, rather than outcome-based. Evaluation should be based on a wider variety of

approaches and measurement of results, including a closer examination of the programmes' initial objectives and results achieved. Finally, evaluation should be conducted over a longer period of time, so as to assess the total economic and social impact of training courses, and should be systematically embedded in policy design.

In short, governments are faced with three challenges:

- Improving learning opportunities for all adults, including through rectifying past educational deficiencies and making full use of the capacities of adults.
- Raising the efficiency and quality of adult learning provision, public and private, including through appropriate financial mechanisms.
- Ensuring better coherence in the mechanisms for knowledge renewal and higher efficiency in the delivery of learning.

8.3. Addressing the challenges: key features of an integrated approach to adult learning policies

In the face of these challenges, this review offers a comprehensive policy strategy that addresses a number of issues: government policies and approaches to the provision of adult learning; the individual's incentive to engage in adult learning; financial and other arrangements that may encourage firms to invest in the human capital of their workers; pedagogical issues and issues of quality control in the delivery of training courses and effective evaluation of outcomes.

A coherent adult learning strategy is therefore needed.

Making adult learning more attractive to adults, including the low-skilled

One of the most interesting findings of this review is that a majority of low-skilled individuals lack the motivation to engage in adult learning programmes. As shown in Chapter 5, almost half of the people with low skills (literacy Level 1) believe that their skills are good or excellent, and a similar proportion of people with low skills (literacy Levels 1 and 2) do not believe their skills are limiting to their work. If adults are to return to learning, therefore, it is important that learning be made valuable and attractive to them.

First, motivation issues have to be addressed.

An examination of good practices carried out for the purposes of this review shows that the way training courses are organised can help improve individuals' motivation:

- This can be done by providing courses that meet a wide range of adults' learning needs: basic and remedial education; upper secondary qualifications or their equivalent; specific vocational preparation in skill upgrading; leisure and recreational courses; and courses that lead to formal qualifications as well as those that do not.
- One of the key elements of an attractive adult learning system is the use of a pedagogy suited to adults rather than to the young. Contextualising learning to make it relevant to adults' experience and using project-based methods are among the ways in which this can be done. The craft school workshops, trade schools and employment workshops in Spain are a good example of integration of training,

This means that learning should be made more accessible, e.g. by organising modular courses,...

experience and information, together with techniques for employment and self-employment searches for people who are unemployed.

- Another way of making learning attractive is by allowing adults to study at their own pace. As highlighted in Chapter 6, one of the most promising ways is the creation of a modular system (as has been done in countries like Denmark, and Switzerland, and initiated in Portugal). A modular system is an interesting way of bringing flexibility and transparency to adult learning, provided that the modules are built as parts of a coherent system and not seen as a justification for a piecemeal system.
- ICT and distance education can be part of national policies to ensure wider access. However, they should not be seen as universal solutions, for a number of reasons. Many adults lack the skills needed to handle the necessary software and hardware; ICT can be difficult to access and expensive to purchase; and access via the Internet can be costly. Where distance education is built into access policies, a face-to-face component is still often important for adults.
- Good information, advice and guidance, suited to the individual needs of adults, are among the key factors that make learning more accessible. National policies can improve the information and advice available to adults by funding national education information call centres; funding community groups to develop guidance services; funding educational institutions to develop information and advisory services; developing high-quality career information products that can be accessed both in print and electronically; and ensuring that public employment staff are trained and qualified to advise adults on education and training for career development.
- Outreach policies to provide information to the general public can help to widen access. Publicising adult learning activities and the benefits of following them through campaigns in the mass media – as in the example of Adult Learners' Week (initiated in the United Kingdom in 1992 and replicated in almost all reviewed countries) – is a way of reaching adults who otherwise might not consider formal learning. Learnfestival in Switzerland is another example of efforts to promote access and participation of adults in learning. Outreach is also important to reach those with little motivation to learn. Good practices in this area can focus on outreach through the web of public social services or through children's schools to parents.

... that a well-functioning system of recognition and certification of learning has to be established...

Recognition of prior learning is also a key to making learning more attractive for adults, and one of the key policy initiatives that governments can take as part of an integrated approach to adult learning. Low-skilled employees are often put off by traditional theoretical educational methods. Recognition of skills as they are put to use can create a process that will facilitate subsequent access to certificates by avoiding the discouraging effect of a "ladder" that is already too high. Portugal is in the process of implementing 84 centres of recognition, validation and certification of competencies (CRVCC), covering the whole country. In British Columbia, Canada, there are guidelines that cover prior learning recognition of both the K-12 system and of adult education and the Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology carries out training modules, enhancement

projects, publications and conferences about best practices, and other activities intended to promote PLAR. Assessing and giving credit for knowledge and skills acquired in work, home or community settings are two of the main ways to attract adults by making sure they do not waste time learning again what they already know.

Certification of the skills and competencies acquired through learning is another important way in which it can be made attractive. This can be done in the form of an official and recognised document given to all learners who have complied with the requirements of a course. Certification will generally be more valuable if it is recognised by the labour market.

The physical design of institutions matters too. This means that, to be effective, programmes need to take into account day care facilities, parking, canteens that serve meals after normal working hours, and accommodation assistance where relevant. In particular, in most of the countries participating in the thematic review, the distance to the next adult learning centre is an issue. Locating learning institutions in an equitable way across geographic regions seems an appropriate way of solving some of the access problem. Providing an adequate public transport service is also a concern in some areas.

Finally, scheduling learning so that it suits adults' circumstances is a key issue in all countries participating in the thematic review. Policies targeting wider adult access need to ensure that institutions and learning centres are open when adults are able to participate – not only within normal working hours but also on evenings, weekends, and during summer holiday periods for example – and secure the arrangements with teachers that this entails.

... and that appropriate learning facilities have to be created.

Enhancing the financial incentives to invest in the human capital of adults

The financing of the adult learning systems is a key but complex issue. As Chapter 4 shows, adult learning is funded by both public and private sources in all the countries under review. And indeed it seems agreed that responsibility for financing should be shared among all partners. Governments can provide the right incentives to create a conducive environment for adults to participate. Enterprises should be involved too, through the provision of on-the-job or other training activities and, according to the context, with co-operative financing mechanisms. In some cases, making individuals participate in the financing, if they can afford it, can also be applicable as a return on the benefits that they receive from participation. Sweden's stand on this is different, as they believe adult learning, like mandatory education, is a public good that should be provided by the state, and so study support should be given to those who need it.

Second, shared financing is important.

There is also a need for governments to provide equitable access to learning opportunities and to cater to the needs of the disadvantaged. Indeed, when considering financing systems and incentives structures, it is essential to take into account one major challenge: the limited learning opportunities available to unskilled workers and other groups at risk. For instance, some countries are considering the possibility of providing greater government support to those groups and correspondingly lower direct public support to skilled workers.

Financial arrangements should take into account learning needs of vulnerable groups...

... so that both individuals and firms have an incentive to invest in human capital.

In general, it is acknowledged that financing arrangements should improve incentives to participate in learning programmes (in particular for low-educated workers) while at the same time remaining affordable. There are several possible policy avenues to achieve this: giving entitlements to learning leave during working hours; study leave (as recently introduced in Norway); or finance for study in the form of loans, grants or tax incentives. Alternation leave in Finland has a twofold purpose: employees can have leave from work and unemployed job seekers can obtain work experience. New financing mechanisms such as learning credits, subsidised tuition fees, individual learning accounts and low-interest loans are policy initiatives that can address affordability.

But financing arrangements have to be consistent with those of the broader set of education and labour market institutions. In particular, working time practices have to allow for learning leave. And wage-setting mechanisms should be such that certified learning leads to higher pay. This is also one reason why the role of social partners is so important when discussing adult learning policies.

Financial incentives can also be increased by allowing training to be treated as an investment for taxation purposes rather than an expenditure (as in Norway, where there is tax exemption for employer financed education); by establishing enterprise training levies (as in the Canadian province of Quebec, the Swiss canton of Geneva, or Spain); or by setting up a national or sectoral training fund.

Improving the quality of learning programmes

Third, a number of steps can be taken to improve quality control.

This volume stresses the importance of mechanisms that improve the quality of learning programmes. Improvement can be achieved, for example, through better monitoring and evaluation; through improving statistical systems; through better accreditation systems; through better performance evaluation at the institution level; and through better monitoring of student outcomes and graduate destinations. The programmes *EduQua* in Switzerland and *QUALFOR* in Portugal are interesting examples of how closer monitoring forms part of the quality assurance system. Many countries have also created institutes in charge of evaluating the quality of education and training, devoted exclusively to adult learning (such as *VOX* in Norway) or more broadly to all kinds of learning (such as the National Board of Education in Finland and *EVA* in Denmark).

Setting standards for service delivery and publicly certifying the achievement of these standards constitute another approach to quality improvement that can be incorporated in an integrated policy. The *Investors in People (IiP)* programme in the United Kingdom is an example.

Learning can be made attractive to adults by making sure that the curriculum is relevant and useful to their needs. This could be achieved, for example, by regularly monitoring students' views on their courses and by updating the curriculum accordingly. Such assessments should not be carried out only after a course but throughout the entire learning activity, so that timely feedback can be given to curriculum designers.

Adopting a holistic approach to adult learning

Forth, an integrated policy framework is needed.

The above policies provide a rationale for a holistic adult learning policy. Such a holistic rationale places adult learning policies at the centre of national labour market policies, not just as one part of policies to deal

with unemployment or a tool for addressing short-term and limited skill shortages. It includes a strong preventive element, by enhancing workers' employability and thus reducing the risk of long-term unemployment – which often entails more expensive interventions *vis-à-vis* the preventive approach. It also makes adult learning, alongside initial education and training, a tool for achieving national goals of economic development and social cohesion. This explains the recent emphasis on national policies for adult learning that has been observed in the countries participating in the thematic review.¹ Indeed, countries are grappling with ways to develop comprehensive and integrated policy frameworks for adult learning.

In contrast to the fragmented approach that can be observed in many countries, a holistic approach – encompassing both formal and informal learning as well as general education, vocational education and enterprise training – requires co-ordination:

This means better policy co-ordination within government and between social partners...

- This needs to occur within government, as well as between government and a wide range of non-government actors such as employers, trade unions, private and public educational institutions, and community groups. Examples of specific institutions to help co-ordinate adult learning policies include ANEFA in Portugal and the Learning and Skills Council in the United Kingdom.
- A co-ordinated approach involves the need to ensure balanced interaction between a top-down approach – in which governments define structures and financing procedures – and a bottom-up approach that enables local actors to provide feedback on the problems they face and the innovative solutions that they have found to try to solve them. Monitoring the implementation process of reforms is also essential.
- A holistic approach can also be considered through a comprehensive approach to national qualification systems, as in Finland and the United Kingdom and work in this direction in Spain.
- Partnerships can also contribute to a holistic approach, and have appeared in a number of countries as a means of co-operation and co-ordination. Examples are those developed in Canada and in the Autonomous Community of La Rioja in Spain. Partnerships allow potential learners to be reached and use regional synergies in terms of funding, physical space and the optimisation of public and private resources.
- Policy processes that co-ordinate well across the sectors and among the many actors involved, that incorporate rational funding mechanisms, and that build monitoring and evaluation into policy development all make systems more effective. These are the aims of the recent adult education and training reform (VEU-Reform) in Denmark.
- In the face of present gaps in the knowledge base, providing better support of policy choices requires research and analysis.

1. Examples include: Canada's Skills and Learning Agenda; Denmark's Adult Education Reform; Finland's Joy of Learning report; Norway's Competence Reform; Portugal's Strategy for the development of adult education and the agreement on employment, labour and education and training policy between the government and the social partners; Spain's National Vocational Training Programme; Sweden's Adult Learning Initiative; Switzerland's Law on Vocational Training; and the United Kingdom's New Skills and Learning Act.

... as well as greater coherence between individuals' and firms' incentives to invest in human capital...

Such integrated policy frameworks also need to place the individual and the enterprise at the centre – in shaping incentives to participate; in funding mechanisms; in the design of adult learning programmes; and in determining outcomes. They need to make explicit the relative responsibilities of individuals, enterprises and governments within an overall framework. As in initial education, they need to balance goals of economic development with equity goals and social and personal development. They need to recognise the reality that many adults in OECD countries have at best completed lower secondary education; they often have low levels of basic skills; and many have been away from formal learning for some years.

... and stronger complementarities between market signals and public provision.

The efficiency of adult learning systems will be improved by strengthening the market signals that can allow supply and demand to match one another, *e.g.*: by decentralising to the local or regional levels decisions on which course to allocate resources to; by providing funds to individuals rather than to institutions; by improving occupational and educational information systems; by involving enterprises in the governance of education and training institutions; and by stimulating local partnerships that can initiate programmes and assist in their management.

A balance between efficiency and equity must be found.

Finally, efforts must be made to strike a reasonable balance between efficiency and equity. Public institutions must be more than the providers of last resort for disadvantaged adults; they must play a leading role in an advanced skill policy. A refocusing of public financing towards the demand side and the needs of learners is necessary to broaden adults' participation in education and training, since existing training institutions may not be able to cover all needs.

8.4. In conclusion

Governments have many tools to stimulate adult learning markets and to make them more effective.

The thematic review has revealed both the existence of an active market for adult learning in many countries, and the range of interventions that are open to governments in order to stimulate that market, to make it more effective, and to address market failure.

Machinery for the recognition of adult learning is normally in the hands of government, and there is much that governments can do centrally – through stimulating better certification systems, through encouraging the recognition of prior learning, and through introducing credit transfer mechanisms – to improve adult learning policies. The involvement of social partners is crucial in this process. Governments must be involved in some of the key decisions having to do with quality assurance through establishing systems for the accreditation of both public and private learning providers.

Recognition systems and incentive policies are among them.

Another key role for the government lies in its capacity to influence the incentive system for all actors involved in adult learning: the learners, the employers, and educational institutions in particular. This can be done through tax incentives or by an appropriate loans and grants system. Government can also stimulate demand for learning activities by encouraging the creation or extension of a right to study leave. More flexibility in work schedules helps to reconcile learning with the other obligations adults have.

Governments have to take the lead in addressing market failures. This includes addressing deficiencies in adults' basic skills, especially among people living in deprived areas or at risk of being socially excluded, and preventing the risk of firms investing too little or too unevenly in training, especially among low-skilled workers, older workers and workers in SMEs. With such deficiencies addressed, there is strong evidence that policies to support adult learning activities that are embedded in the community are successful, as is less formal learning provided on the job. Governments can play a role through the provision of information, through shifting resources, through helping to create a conducive environment to support such initiatives, and through better recognition and validation of less formal learning. Best practices of training for disadvantaged groups must be identified and disseminated; best practices would in particular include those of local development associations, which have long played a key role by proposing innovative approaches for the groups in question. Governments' influence over national legislation and public resourcing policies is perhaps the most important way it can express clear commitment to supporting integrated policies for adult learning.

Governments should intervene to address market failures.

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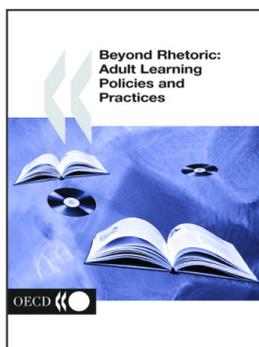
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