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## Equity and Equality of Opportunity



*Analyses of developments and policies that influence equity have been an underlying priority in much of the OECD educational work. The persistent patterns of inequality have been highlighted, with the increasing quality of international data permitting analyses relating to many pertinent groups of learners and their educational experiences. The dimensions and groups include gender, age, migrant status, special needs and social background, and cover adult formal and non-formal learning, as well as schooling, vocational education and higher education. Recent OECD analysis has also charted the nature of the “digital divide”. Findings and recommendations from a major international review of equity in education published in 2007 – No More Failures – are presented. The chapter reports promising policy directions from studies published since then, including those on immigrants’ education, cultural diversity and teacher education, and on adults in foundation programmes for numeracy and literacy.*



## INTRODUCTION

Analyses of developments and policies that influence equity have been an underlying priority in much of the OECD educational work. The persistent patterns of inequality have been highlighted, with the increasing quality of international data permitting analyses relating to many pertinent groups of learners and their educational experiences. OECD analysis has shown that there need be no contradiction between equity and efficiency, and indeed has underlined how damaging to economic as well as social goals is the phenomenon of exclusion and widespread under-achievement. A major international review of equity in education – *No More Failures*, published in 2007 – outlines ten broad policy directions around the design of provision, practices and resourcing. The charting of the outcomes of, and opportunities and policies for, different population groups has been undertaken across the many sectors of education and training, including longstanding work on special educational needs.


Ethnic and cultural diversity makes society richer, but reaping the full benefits requires special efforts from the education system. The OECD *Thematic Reviews on Migrant Education* have examined the education outcomes of the children of immigrants in five OECD countries. Diversity in the classroom can enhance learning and prepare students for the outside world but major challenges are facing many schools and teachers to make this happen; the “Teacher Education for Diversity” project examines how countries educate teachers to respond to increasing cultural diversity and the educational challenges faced by indigenous populations. Language is one key to success and work on Globalisation and Linguistic Competencies explores why some individuals are successful in learning non-native languages and others not, and why certain education systems appear more successful than others at teaching non-native languages.

## KEY FINDINGS


**There is no contradiction between equity and efficiency in education:** There is a widespread argument that the redistribution of resources to those in greatest need helps equity but damages efficiency. The OECD in its analysis of equity, as well as the World Bank, argue that equity and efficiency are in fact complementary. This is clearly the case within basic education: school failure has large costs not only to those involved, but also to society, because the welfare costs of marginalised persons are large. Reasonably-priced, effective measures to address failure benefit both efficiency and equity. Some analyses even suggest that an equitable distribution of skills across populations has a strong impact on overall economic performance.

 *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education*, 2007, Chapter 1; World Bank, 2005

**The countries with high quality and high equity have embraced student heterogeneity and avoided premature and differentiated structures:** Early tracking is associated with reduced equity in outcomes and sometimes weakens results overall. In countries with early selection of students into highly differentiated education systems, differences among schools are large and the relationship between socio-economic background and student school performance stronger.

 *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education*, 2007, Chapter 3

**The general upgrading of attainments and qualifications increasingly excludes those who have not shared in this advance:** Many adults remain unqualified and some young people still do not successfully complete secondary education. Across the OECD nearly one in three adults (31%) have only primary or lower secondary education – a real disadvantage in terms of employment and life chances. In all OECD countries, those with weak basic qualifications are much less likely to continue learning in adult life and there are big differences between countries. That there are fewer proportionately with these very low attainment and qualification levels increases the risk of their exclusion and detachment from economic and social life.

 *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education*, 2007, Chapter 2



**Choice may stimulate quality but with risks for equity:** There are quality arguments to be made in favour of creating a degree of choice as a vehicle for stimulating improvement. When choices exist, schools must then look beyond their own walls at what others – their potential “competitors” – are doing; without some room for exit to be exercised, parents and students have no threat to back up voice. OECD work confirms that better educated, middle-class parents are more likely to avail themselves of choice opportunities and send their children to the “best” school they can find, widening the gaps between the sought-after schools and the rest. Across countries, greater choice in school systems is associated with larger differences in the social composition of different schools.


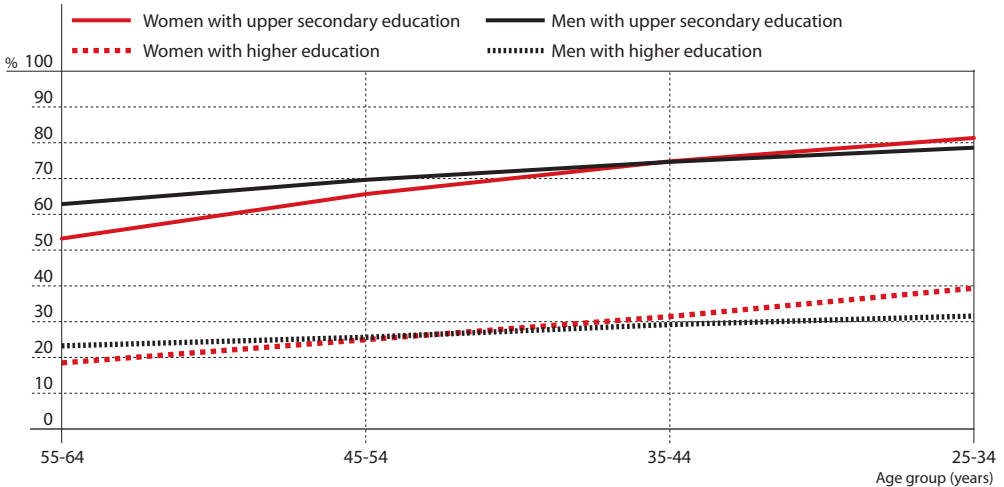
 *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education, 2007, Chapter 3; Demand-sensitive Schooling? Evidence and Issues, 2006*

Figure 7.1.

**Women have overtaken men in upper secondary and higher education:  
Attainments of different adult age groups, 2008**



Source: OECD Education Database.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310092>


**Girls and women have now moved clearly ahead of boys and men in education:** The number of expected years in education between ages 15 and 29 across OECD countries enjoyed by young women – 6.9 years – now surpasses those of young men who average only 6.7. It was higher in all OECD countries in 2008 except Australia, Germany, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland and Turkey. Female graduation rates from upper secondary education are higher in 23 of the 26 OECD countries permitting the comparison – the exceptions being Switzerland, Turkey and the United States, as well as in all of the partner countries for which such comparisons could be made. The female advantage gap is more than ten percentage points in Denmark, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain. Moreover, only in Japan, Korea, Switzerland and Turkey do the entry rates of men to tertiary education now exceed those of women.

 *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators, 2010, Indicators A2 and C3*




Recent PISA analyses have identified three groups of countries regarding gender differences in science performance across countries and within schools:


- **Where gender differences are insignificant on the three competency scales of science performance and within schools:** examples here are Australia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the partner country Estonia.
- **Where there is an insignificant overall gender difference but those within schools in favour of male students are significant:** Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Slovak Republic, (as well as the partner countries/economies Croatia, Hong Kong-China, Macao-China, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Tunisia, Uruguay).
- **Where there are consistently high gender differences in favour of males, on both the overall science score and within schools:** examples of these, before and after accounting for programme level and destination, are Denmark, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom.

 *Equally Prepared for Life? How 15-Year-Old Boys and Girls Perform in School*, 2009, Chapter 4

**Relatively small proportions of compulsory school students receive additional funding for their education due to special needs, though there are cases where this amounts to 1 in 5 students:** In the countries supplying data on additional funding across the three categories of needs (disabilities, difficulties and disadvantages), nearly 3% median of students (2.7%) receive additional outlays because they are assessed as disabled, rising to just over 5% in the United States. Additional spending on those with difficulties is in general low (2.4%), rising to 3.3% for those counted as “disadvantaged”. Much higher proportions are found in some countries – such as the 17% of United Kingdom compulsory students qualifying for funding due to learning difficulties, the 15% and over in the Flemish Community of Belgium, Mexico, the Netherlands and the United States because of their disadvantage.

 *Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages: Policies, Statistics and Indicators – 2007 Edition*, 2008, Chapter 4

**Boys with disabilities and receiving additional resources outnumber such girls by approximately 60 to 40, rising to two-thirds to one-third in their call on specific resources for learning and behavioural difficulties:** These are consistent results, repeatedly found in different studies with different methodologies. There is a consistent majority of males over females in special needs education provision or in receipt of additional resources for disabilities and learning difficulties. Whether looked at by location (special school, special class, regular class), cross-nationally or nationally, age of student or stage of education, boys outnumber girls. For learning difficulties, the difference is even larger with males outnumbering females by two-thirds to one-third.

 *Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages: Policies, Statistics and Indicators – 2007 Edition*, 2008, Chapter 4

**The digital divide defined by technology access has faded in schools but a second one based on digital competence more stubbornly remains:** In almost all OECD countries, students attend schools equipped with computers and most of these are connected to the Internet (though there do remain some gaps in digital home access). A more stubborn digital divide is that between those who have the necessary competences and skills to benefit from computer use, and those who do not, which competences are closely linked to students’ economic, cultural and social capital. Nevertheless, school use of digital media can help to reduce the digital divide, and computer use is associated with improved academic skills and competences.


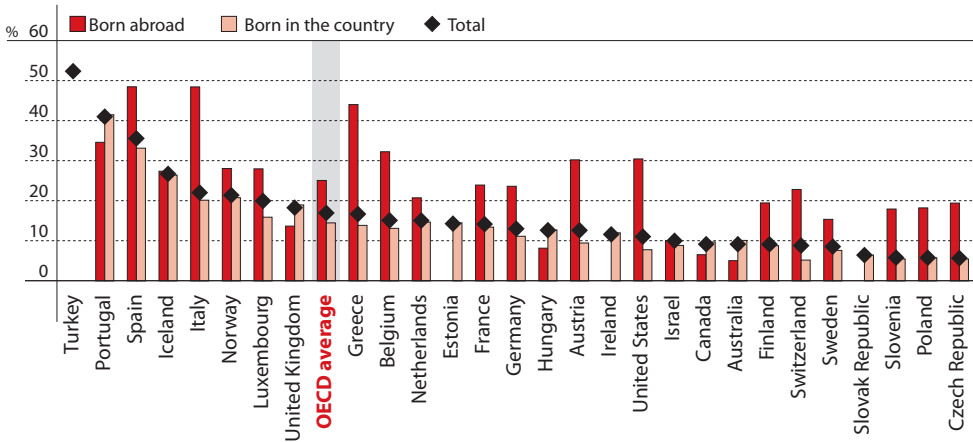
 *Are the New Millennium Learners Making the Grade? Technology Use and Educational Performance in PISA*, 2010, Chapters 4, 5 and Executive Summary




Figure 7.2.  
Proportion of 20-24 year-olds who are not in education and have not attained upper secondary education, by migrant status (2007)




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

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310453>

**Immigrant students largely face greater difficulties in education than their native peers:** The performance of immigrant students in reading, science and mathematics in compulsory education is for the most part comparatively lower than that of their native peers. This is despite generally positive attitudes towards learning among immigrant students. In some countries immigrant students (first-generation) are less likely to attend early childhood education and care institutions, and more likely to repeat a grade, attend vocational schools and drop out from secondary education. They have more limited access to quality education. They are more likely to attend schools that are located in big cities that serve students who are on average from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds and with higher concentrations of other immigrant students.

 *Closing the Gap for Immigrant Students: Policies, Practice, and Performance*, 2010, Chapter 2; *Where Immigrant Students Succeed: A Comparative Review of Performance and Engagement in PISA 2003*, 2006, Chapter 2

**Young adults born abroad are much more likely than the others to be already out of education and not to have completed upper secondary education (but with notable exceptions):** Many more young adults aged 20-24 years old have low educational attainment – as indicated by having already left education without having completed at the least upper secondary education – when they are born outside the country (see Figure 7.2). Across the OECD, a quarter of this age group born abroad has low attainment on this measure as compared with only 15% of those born in the country. The gap is 20 percentage points or more in Austria, Greece, Italy and the United States. Yet, not everywhere do immigrant young adults lag behind the rest of the population in educational attainment: a higher proportion of foreign-born 20-24 year-olds are still in education or already have upper secondary education in Australia, Canada, Hungary, Portugal and the United Kingdom than those born in the country.


 *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators*, 2010, Indicator C3




**Top performers in science generally attend schools with relatively privileged students and often private, though in some systems the link to social background is weaker:** Top performers in science at age 15 tend to be in schools where others are also high performers and from relatively advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Many such schools select students according to their academic record and many of them are private. Typically, about a quarter of top performers in science come from a socio-economic background below the country's average but in Japan, Finland and Austria, and the partner economies Macao-China and Hong Kong-China, a third or more of the top performers in science come from such a lower socio-economic background. Female students are as likely to be top performers as male students.

 *Top of the Class: High Performers in Science in PISA 2006, 2009, Chapter 2*

**Socially advantaged and female students spend more time in regular lessons and individual study in science, mathematics and the language of instruction:** In most countries, socio-economically advantaged students spend much more time in regular school lessons and individual study in science, mathematics and the language of instruction than disadvantaged students: about 11.5 hours per week studying those 3 subjects in regular school lessons compared with 9.8 hours per week for disadvantaged students. This overall OECD difference of 1 hour and 42 minutes per week breaks down into around 50 minutes more per week in science, 30 minutes more mathematics and 20 minutes in the language of instruction. In most countries, females spend around 40 minutes more time in regular school lessons and individual study in science, mathematics and the language of instruction than males.

 *Quality Time for Students: Learning In and Out of School, forthcoming, Chapter 3*

**In many OECD countries, tertiary education remains dominated by students from well-educated backgrounds:** Evidence from the 1990s showed that young people whose parents had tertiary education themselves were between two and six times as likely to complete tertiary studies as those whose parents had only secondary level qualifications. Only a few countries have data to permit such calculations; among that do, students with fathers who had completed higher education were more than twice as likely to be in higher education in Austria, France, Germany, Portugal and the United Kingdom. It is substantially less in Spain (1.5 as likely) and Ireland (1.1). Countries providing more equal access to higher education – such as Finland, Ireland and Spain – are also the countries with the more equal between-school performances in PISA 2000.

 *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education, 2007; Education at a Glance 2007: OECD Indicators, 2007, Indicator A7*

**Social background strongly influences teenage expectations to go on to complete higher education, with the influence seen most powerfully in the Slovak Republic, Switzerland and Hungary:** PISA information on students' social backgrounds allow their categorisation into "high" and "low" socio-economic status, and the comparison between the expectations of the "high" group of 15-year-olds to complete higher education and the expectations of the "low" group. In all countries, there is a clear relationship between expectations to get an advanced education and social background, with the odds mainly in the range of 2.0 to 2.9. The odds are lowest – expectations least shaped by background – in Finland (1.8). They are over 2.9 in Austria (3.0), Belgium (3.0), Greece (3.0), the Slovak Republic (3.1) and Switzerland (3.1), and rise to 4.0 in Hungary.

 *Education at a Glance 2007: OECD Indicators, 2007, Indicator A4*



**Engagement in adult learning is far higher among those already well qualified compared with those with low attainment, as it is for younger compared with older adults:** On average across OECD countries, someone with tertiary education is almost three times as likely to be involved in some form of formal or non-formal adult learning programme as those with only low attainment levels. It is even around 20 percentage points higher than those with the upper secondary level attainment. In countries where adult learning is widespread these gaps tend to be less marked. The gaps among women tend to be wider than for men according to background education: female tertiary graduates engage more in adult learning than male tertiary graduates, but women with low educational attainment lag behind even the poorly qualified men. Older adults (55-64 year-olds) are half as likely to engage in adult education activities as younger adults (25-34 year-olds).

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

**Recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes addresses equity by offering additional opportunities and routes for those who otherwise miss out:** First, it can make it easier for dropouts to return to formal learning, giving them a second chance. Second, it can be attractive to groups such as indigenous people and migrants whose competences may otherwise be less recognised, or who have not been able to acquire qualifications through the formal education system. Third, it can help to rebalance equity between generations since a much smaller cohort of older workers had access to higher education and its qualifications than is the case today.

 *Recognising Non-formal and Informal Learning: Outcomes, Policies and Practices, 2010, Executive Summary*

## POLICY DIRECTIONS

The OECD advances ten steps – major policy recommendations which would reduce school failure and dropout, make society fairer and avoid the large social costs of marginalised adults with few basic skills. These include:

- 1. Limit early tracking and streaming, and postpone academic selection:** The OECD suggests careful review of early differentiation into schools of different types in those education systems that practise it and holds strong reservations about introducing it in those education systems that do not. The early tracking and streaming of school students need to be justified in terms of proven benefits, given that it so often poses a risk to equity. Systems that use early tracking should consider raising the age when it first takes place and academic selection needs to be used with caution.
- 2. Manage school choice so as to contain the risks to equity:** The exercise of choice poses risks to equity and requires careful management to ensure that it does not increase the differences in social composition of different schools. When there is the exercise of parental choice, the oversubscribed schools need to find ways to even out the social mix – such as through lottery systems as selection methods – and financial premiums to schools with disadvantaged students may also help.
- 3. In upper secondary education, provide attractive alternatives, remove dead ends and prevent dropout:** Early prevention of dropout is the best cure and monitoring those at risk should be linked to interventions to improve outcomes and prevent dropout. Basic schooling should support those who are struggling rather than focus primarily on those who excel. Upper secondary education should be attractive, offering good quality pathways with effective links to the world of work. Special programmes to smooth transitions at the end of basic schooling can help encourage students to stay in school. Good quality vocational tracks are essential – removing an academic hurdle from entrance to general upper secondary education, as Norway and Sweden have done, can serve to increase the status of vocational tracks.



- 4. Offer second chances to gain from education:** Second chances are necessary for those who lack basic education and skills. These include programmes that provide literacy training, primary and secondary education, work-based programmes and arrangements to recognise informal learning. Across OECD countries, many adults and young dropouts without basic education obtain school qualifications through second chance programmes. In the United States, almost 60% of dropouts eventually earn a high school credential (GED certificate).
- 5. Provide systematic help to those who fall behind in school and reduce high rates of school-year repetition:** The high repetition rates in some countries should be reduced by changing incentives to schools so that they do not so readily use repetition and through developing alternatives for those who are struggling. One way is through greater interventions in classrooms which have proved to be effective in addressing learning needs of weaker students, like the Finnish approach of offering a sequence of intensifying interventions for those with difficulties to draw them back into the mainstream. Teachers need a highly-developed professional repertoire aimed at supporting those who are falling behind.
- 6. Strengthen the links between school and home, especially for disadvantaged families:** Parental involvement – working with children at home and actively participating in school activities – improves results. Disadvantaged parents tend to be among the least involved: schools need to target their efforts to improve communication with the most disadvantaged parents and help develop environments conducive to learning in homes. After-school homework clubs offer one way to support those with weak home support.
- 7. Respond to diversity and provide for the successful inclusion of migrants and minorities within mainstream education:** Incentives to encourage immigrants into early childhood education are important. Particular attention needs to be given to language learning at all levels, including through teacher professional development – for this and for all other aspects of teaching in multicultural environments. At the same time, segregation must be avoided including the tendency for too many immigrant children to end up in special education institutions.
- 8. Provide strong education for all, giving priority to early childhood provision and basic schooling:** Where fees are involved in early childhood education, they should be moderate and remitted for those too poor to pay. Countries which charge fees for early childhood but not tertiary education need to re-examine their policies on equity grounds. A strong focus is needed in basic education on those with learning difficulties, and the implicit incentive for some to drop out provided by linking grants to families with school performance means that this practice should be reviewed on equity grounds.
- 9. Direct resources to the students with the greatest needs, so that poorer communities enjoy at least the same level of provision as others better-off, and to support schools in difficulty:** Countries need adequate mechanisms to redistribute resources and minimise regional inequities in provision with the aim of reaching acceptable minimum standards everywhere. Additional resources need to be channelled through schools to help disadvantaged students while the stigma of labelling particular schools as “for disadvantaged students” should be avoided.
- 10. Set concrete targets for more equity, particularly related to low school attainment and dropouts:** Numerical targets are a useful policy lever through articulating clearly what is to be achieved, rather than simply the means to improvement. Countries can usefully adopt a small number of





numerical targets, particularly for reducing the numbers of school-leavers with poor basic skills and of early school dropouts. Policy needs also to manage, and respond to, the public debate which follows publication of school-level test results, so that it does not exacerbate the equity problems themselves, and it should give energetic support to those schools with weak results.

 *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education, 2007, Summary and Policy Recommendations*

Many of the factors involved in improving teaching and teacher education for cultural diversity are identical with good practice in general; others are specific to the challenges of diversity:

- **Develop a shared vision on the nature of increasingly diverse populations**, at different levels and with a variety of stakeholders on how these are reflected in schools and classrooms, and how to accommodate changing landscapes.
- **Improve the diversity of student teachers and teachers**, calling for holistic policy plans within countries and regions for attracting, retaining and inserting diverse student teachers into the teaching force.
- **Promote awareness of contextual specificity and preparation for teaching diverse student populations in pre-service and in-service teacher programmes**, from general principles of working in diverse educational contexts to teaching specific student populations.
- **Focus on improving the attraction and retention of diverse student teachers and teachers**, who can serve as important role models and bring different perspectives into the classroom.
- **Focus on attracting and retaining well-qualified teachers in diverse schools**, understanding better how to do it and implementing necessary measures.
- **Encourage timely, relevant and coherent data collection about who is in the diverse classroom landscape** for more informed decision making on how best to respond.

 *Educating Teachers for Diversity: Meeting the Challenge, 2010, Chapter 13*

**Actively engaging immigrant parents and communities in education represents an important goal in improving equity, with many promising examples of how this can be done:** Parental and community involvement involving immigrant groups and families represent key directions for building positive attitudes and conditions for achievement, as well as enriching school systems. Among the promising directions being followed and programmes established in different countries and localities are:

- Providing adequate information through various communication channels.
- Establishing partnerships between schools and parents.
- Building national platforms for immigrant parents.
- Involving parents in early childhood education and care.
- Involving parents in classroom instruction.
- Assisting and up-skilling immigrant parents.
- Setting up “ethnic mentoring/role models” programmes.
- Encouraging community involvement in providing opportunities for young immigrants.
- Providing additional learning time and after-school support.

 *Closing the Gap for Immigrant Students: Policies, Practice and Performance, 2010, Chapter 3*



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

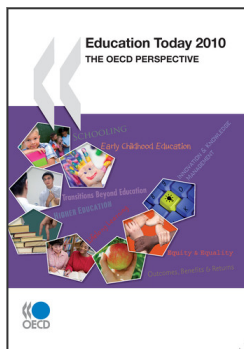
- **Promote active debate on the nature of teaching, learning and assessment:** Countries need open discussion about such questions as what should be the underlying principles driving provision in the adult LLN system, and what counts as success and for whom?
- **Strengthen professionalism:** Effective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

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



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