

Chapter 6


Lifelong Learning

“Lifelong Learning” has been a defining goal for education and training policies for many years, emphasising the need for organised learning to take place over the whole lifespan and across the different main spheres that make up our lives (“life-wide”). OECD data confirm how extensive educational “careers” have become. There have been discrete studies which shed light on the nature of the challenge: the need to question the continued “front-end” expansion of education systems if lifelong learning is to be achieved; the room for considerable improvement in guidance systems; the importance of financing and qualification systems. Despite acknowledgement of its importance, holistic analyses of lifelong learning have been less a feature of OECD work in recent years and the relatively dated evidence base comparing countries in their implementation of this broad aim similarly underlines that implementation in countries is patchy and often disappointing.

6.1. Key findings and conclusions

OECD proposes four fundamental features of lifelong learning:


- **A systemic view.** This is the most distinguishing feature of lifelong learning. The lifelong learning framework views the demand for, and the supply of, learning opportunities as part of a connected system covering the whole lifecycle and comprising all forms of formal and informal learning.
- **The centrality of the learner.** This requires a shift in attention from a supply-side focus, for example on formal institutions and arrangements, to the demand side of meeting learner needs.
- **Motivation to learn.** This is an essential foundation for learning that continues throughout life. It requires attention to developing the capacity for “learning to learn” through self-paced and self-directed learning.
- **Multiple objectives of education.** The life-cycle view recognises the multiple goals of education – such as personal development, knowledge development, economic and social and cultural objectives – and that the priorities among these objectives may change over the life cycle.

 *Education Policy Analysis – 2001 Edition, Chapter 1; “Lifelong Learning”, Policy Brief, 2004.*

Very high proportions of young adults – recently in the education system – have now completed upper secondary education ... An average of 78% of 25-34-year-olds in OECD countries now complete at least the upper secondary stage of education (2006). This stands as high as 90% or more in Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Korea, the Slovak Republic, and Sweden, as well as in the Russian Federation and Slovenia. The main watershed of participation in formal education used to be marked by completion of lower secondary schooling which in many countries corresponds to the end of compulsory education; this is clearly now shifting upwards to the next level.

... though not all enjoy such high attainment levels: Still only two-thirds or fewer of young adults in their mid-20s to mid-30s have reached the upper secondary level of attainment in Iceland (67%), Italy (67%), Poland (64%), Portugal (44%), and Spain (64%), and many fewer in Mexico (39%) and Turkey (37%). And even in those countries where completion is high, there is the “down-side” in the form of the relative disadvantage in which it places the

minority of less than a quarter across OECD countries who now leave without finishing upper secondary education.

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

“Educational expectancy” – the number of years of study over a lifetime based on current participation patterns – is above 17 years on average: High “educational expectancy” reflects growing participation both before and after compulsory primary and secondary schooling. In 2004, in 24 of 28 OECD countries which supply data and 4 partner countries, people can expect to be in formal education for between 16 and 21 years. It is 19 years or more in Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden and the United Kingdom. It is less than 16 years in Luxembourg, Mexico, the Slovak Republic, Turkey, and the partner countries Chile, Israel, and the Russian Federation. “Expectancy” synthesises all current patterns and levels for different aged students into a single figure; it is not a prediction about how long a young child today might stay in education in the future.


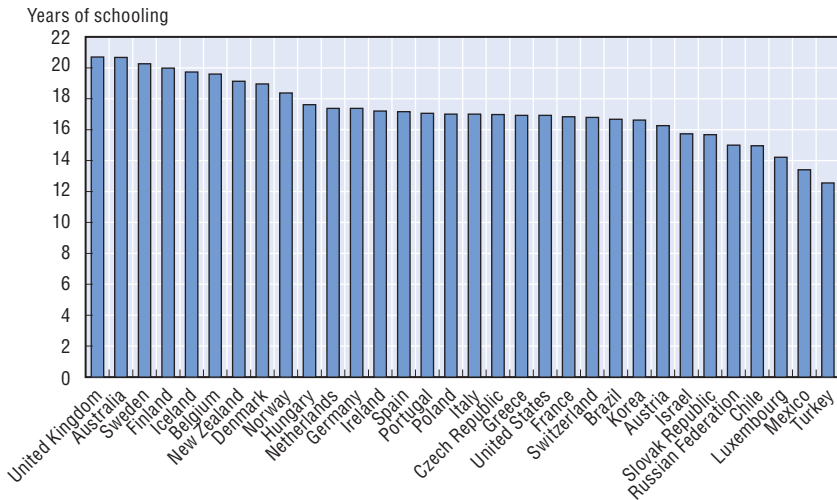

 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2006 Edition, Chapter C.*

Figure 6.1. **Expected time in education for 5-year-olds based on current enrolment patterns (2004)**




Note: The education expectancy is calculated by adding the net enrolment rates for each single year of age from age 5 onwards; the quantitative comparisons take no account of differing lengths of the school year, intensity of participation, or the quality of education across countries.

Source: OECD (2006), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators – 2006 Edition*, OECD Publishing, Paris.


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There are limits to the ever-lengthening duration of initial education, suggesting alternatives to universal long-cycle higher education are needed

to enhance skills and address inequity: OECD analysis of schooling and lifelong learning has identified social and cultural concerns about delaying the attainment of adulthood, and what this means for the healthy development of individuals and society as a whole. It needs to be asked how the interest of many young people in learning can be maintained if the expected duration of initial education is continually pushed outwards, affecting the goals of educational inclusion and the creation of the motivation to learn throughout life. The affordability of continually lengthening periods of initial education is also relevant to the sustainability of such developments.


 *Education Policy Analysis – 2004 Edition, Chapter 3.*

Progress towards the implementation of lifelong learning has been patchy, despite the sustained general expansion of initial education and training systems: A stock-taking of lifelong learning implementation for the 2001 OECD Education Ministers’ meeting identified at that time four groups of countries. The Nordic countries stood out with good performance across multiple sectors. A second tier of countries – Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand – also did well albeit with certain gaps. A third tier, covering Australia, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, was characterised by uneven performance on the available measures, especially of literacy. A fourth group – Ireland, Hungary, Portugal, and Poland – did poorly in comparison with other countries on most measures. A key issue is the importance of – but difficulty of implementing – a “whole of government” approach to lifelong learning.

 “Lifelong Learning”, *Policy brief, 2004; Education Policy Analysis – 2001 Edition, Chapter 2.*


6.2. Orientations for policy

Lifelong learning is a crucial overarching aim of policy and development, including economic development, and calls for additional investment: A cogent statement on the importance of lifelong learning and the need for additional resources was made by German Minister Bulmahn to conclude the OECD policy conference on Co-financing Lifelong Learning. “Support for lifelong learning is essential for society as a whole. [It] is essential to ensure a smooth and equitable transition to a knowledge society, particularly in countries with ageing populations ... Lifelong learning benefits individuals as well as businesses and society. Additional investments in lifelong learning are needed in view of the increasing share of services in the economy, the rapid technological change, an ageing society, the growing importance of knowledge and information in the value of production and extensive economic and social restructuring”.


 *Co-financing Lifelong Learning: Towards a Systemic Approach, 2004, Annex 1.*

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


- **Improving access, quality and equity:** Gaps in access are especially clear as regards very young children and older adults at either side of the main initial education system and these gaps need to be addressed. Access is not simply a matter of enrolment, however, and includes both the quality of the provision involved and the equity to ensure a fair and inclusive distribution of opportunities.
- **Ensuring foundation skills for all:** This requires not just universal access to basic education but improvements in young people’s motivation to learn and their capacity for independent learning. Foundation skills are also needed by those adults who lack them.
- **Recognising all forms of learning, not just formal courses of study:** Learning takes many forms and occurs in many different settings, from formal courses in schools or colleges to various types of experience in families, communities and workplaces. All types of learning need to be recognised and made visible, according to their content, quality and outcomes rather than their location and form.
- **Mobilising resources, rethinking resource allocation across all sectors, settings and over the life-cycle:** Given that higher levels of participation increases costs, countries have used many different approaches to reduce them, especially teaching and personnel costs, rationalisation of the structure of provision, better use of ICTs, and more extensive use of the private sector.
- **Ensuring collaboration among a wide range of partners:** All lifelong learning involves stakeholders well beyond those covered by the educational authorities, and co-ordination in policy development and implementation is essential for success.

 “Lifelong Learning”, *Policy brief*, 2004.

The overarching aim of lifelong learning applies as much to schools as it does to all other settings of education and training: There remains a tendency for school education to be assessed in its own terms rather than its broader success in laying the foundation for lifelong learning. Working towards lifelong learning in schools does not mean simply adding on whole new batteries of items to overloaded reform agendas. Rather, it demands developing the approaches which make learning central, including the motivation in individuals to continue to learn. It means adopting practices that encourage curiosity, innovation, creativity, and teamwork in students. It is about developing cultures of learning with appropriately diverse curricula and assessment methods, including assessment for learning. And schools must be staffed with teaching professionals suitably organised and equipped so they can do so.


 *Education Policy Analysis – 2004 Edition*, Chapter 3.

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

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

Exploit the pivotal role of qualifications systems so as to promote dynamic lifelong education and training systems: Certain aspects of qualifications systems should receive attention in their implications for lifelong learning implementation, including:

- **Increase flexibility and responsiveness:** “Customisation” is one way to describe qualifications systems which are responsive to the changing needs of the economy, employment, and the personal ambitions of individuals. Flexibility is promoted by all the various mechanisms that increase choice.
- **Facilitate open access to qualifications:** An argument for lifelong learning is that individuals can gain qualifications from different starting points. Mechanisms to allow this include the development of new routes to existing qualifications, as will any effective information and guidance system that clarifies qualifications requirements.
- **Diversify assessment procedures:** Assessment methods (and the administration and cost associated with them) are an important influence on the willingness of individuals to engage in learning for a qualification. Credit transfer calls for different modes of assessment and outcomes-based methods also require greater diversity of assessment.
- **Make qualifications progressive:** Accumulating learning experiences and developing competences throughout life is now a central concept, and a significant shift from “once and for all” initial education and training. The key mechanisms here have to do with increasing coherence of the qualifications systems, such as through more developed qualifications frameworks or learning pathways.

 *Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning*, 2007, Chapter 2.

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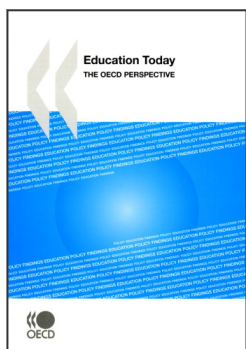


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