

Qualifications and Lifelong Learning

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Introduction

Learning one set of skills at school, technical college or university is no longer enough to carry people throughout their working life. But there is one basic skill that is becoming increasingly important in today's fast-changing technological universe: being able to learn and adapt to the new skills and training that will be required. But learning to learn is not enough; people also need to be sure that they acquire new skills during their careers as efficiently as possible – and that means ensuring that qualifications systems give them credit for the experience and knowledge they have gained, whether in the classroom, in the workplace or elsewhere.

It is costly and demotivating to insist that someone who has been performing a task for six months spend three weeks in a classroom being formally taught how to do it. Or to spend money sending people away to learn a skill that a more experienced colleague could teach them in half a day on-site – but then you have to find a way to judge whether the worker has perfected the skill, and thus merited the reward for being able to perform a new task.

Countries have been trying for some time to reform their qualifications systems to make lifelong learning possible. Most policy makers believe that there is a link between qualification systems and lifelong learning, but it has not been clear up to now what kind of link and how it works.

This *Policy Brief* looks at how national qualifications systems can be used to promote lifelong learning in terms of quantity, quality, efficiency and equitable distribution of learning opportunities. ■

Why does lifelong learning matter?

Globalisation and the growth of the fast-changing knowledge economy mean that people need to upgrade their skills throughout their adult lives to cope with modern life, not just in the area of work but also in their private lives. Often in private life, we learn new skills without even realising it – every new piece of home equipment we buy, from mobile phone to washing machine or steam iron has added features we need to learn how to operate, usually by reading an instruction manual.

In the work arena, adult learning is important for the individual to maintain employability and improve career prospects, since employers need workers with an ever-expanding skills base to keep up with the latest developments.

So it is hardly surprising that lifelong learning for all has become a widely shared policy objective among OECD countries and beyond. It is seen as a necessary condition for individual success in the labour market and for general social well-being. It is also believed that the competitiveness of national economies depends heavily on societies' capacity to encourage and facilitate lifelong learning.

The question then arises of how to achieve lifelong learning for all, and how to measure whether individuals and society are making progress in this area. Qualifications of various types are a tried and tested way of measuring and proving people's accomplishments – diplomas on leaving school, degrees after university, and specific skill qualifications, from a bus driver's licence to an accountancy diploma. But existing national qualifications systems are not necessarily adapted to a fast-changing knowledge economy. They will need to be changed to take account of the need to build on existing knowledge to cope with the latest update in technology, and to measure less tangible skills such as team spirit or willingness to learn. ■

How can qualifications systems affect lifelong learning?

There does seem to be a link between qualifications systems and lifelong learning, but little evidence exists of just how it works. If we can identify and understand the ways in which national qualifications systems deliver, or fail to deliver, lifelong learning, the positive links can be transformed into robust concrete relationships which policy makers can use as a basis for reforming qualifications systems with lifelong learning benefits in mind.

But qualifications systems need to be rethought if they are to be useful in achieving widespread participation in lifelong learning. While many people may be motivated by the idea of acquiring new qualifications, whether for an immediate pay rise or improved longer-term career prospects, one negative experience may be enough to put them off trying again. If the qualification takes too long, is too difficult, or requires people to go over old ground, it may be enough to alienate them from lifelong learning once and for all.

If there is a link between qualifications systems and lifelong learning, the ultimate goal is a qualification system that provides high-quality recognition of learning. There is no one-size-fits-all solution – each country has its own system and culture to start with – but it should be possible to identify the

factors that need to be taken into account in crafting a qualifications system for lifelong learning.

There is little hard evidence on how qualification systems and lifelong learning systems interact. But one area of agreement seems to be the fact that experience during compulsory schooling has a powerful impact on attitudes to learning in later life. A person who comes out of the compulsory school system with a sense of failure may well avoid learning in future, seeing it as simply a chance to fail again.

Countries may also need to redefine what they mean by “qualifications” in relation to lifelong learning. For many, “qualifications” refer to a piece of paper proving someone has successfully completed a specific course of study. But the “qualifications” of use in lifelong learning may be much broader – skills and techniques for performing your job on a day-to-day basis learned from a colleague or workplace mentor, for example. If you stay in the same job, your employer is aware of these added skills, but in a world where jobs are no longer for life, the individual needs a way to communicate this added knowledge to new employers – and they need a way to evaluate these skills. Even paper qualifications tend to lose much, if not all, of their value when someone wants to go and work outside the sector or country that provided the certificate in the first place.

So it is perhaps helpful, before trying to define what makes a good qualifications system for lifelong learning, to define what a “qualification” is in lifelong learning terms. Basically, a qualification is anything that confers official recognition of value in the labour market and in further education and training, so a qualifications system includes all aspects of a country’s activity that result in recognition of learning.

Qualification systems could affect lifelong learning by improving the quantity and quality of learning opportunities available, ensuring equity of access to learning and improving the efficiency of the lifelong learning process.

More learning can be made available by increasing the range and relevance of provisions as well as the number of places available, and by reducing cost, for example. Improving the quality of learning opportunities could involve better matching qualifications to labour market needs, while equity of access can be improved by focussing on what people can actually do, rather than pieces of paper attesting to a body of knowledge. And the whole system needs to be more efficient – it should be possible to build on competences already acquired, for example, so that if a person already has three-quarters of the skills required for a particular qualification, s/he should only have to learn the final quarter, rather than be forced to complete the whole course from the beginning. This is not only more cost-effective, but more attractive to the potential learner. ■

How can policies help?

A study of efforts by 15 countries to promote lifelong learning by reforming qualifications systems reveals 9 broad policy responses. No country uses all nine, but most countries use a combination of several. The nine are:

increased flexibility and responsiveness; motivating young people to learn; linking education and work; facilitating open access to qualifications; diversifying assessment processes; making qualifications progressive; making the qualifications system transparent; reviewing funding and increasing efficiency; and better managing the qualifications system (see Box 1). ■

How to translate policy into practice?

If countries are to see lifelong learning develop further, then everyone's patterns of behaviour needs to change – individuals, employers, and the providers of learning and qualifications. Changing qualification systems may play a role in the process of changing behaviour. But we need to know what factors might influence behaviour, and to look at the barriers to lifelong learning faced by individuals, employers and those providing qualifications and learning.

In addition to broad policy responses to pressures for change in qualifications systems, there are also opportunities for smaller scale actions – or mechanisms – to promote lifelong learning. There is already evidence that the type of qualification system operating in a country does affect the learning behaviour of individuals, employers and qualification and learning providers. By analysing this relationship, a number of mechanisms have been identified that can help improve lifelong learning outcomes. Along with the policy responses, they offer a helpful check list for policy makers as they introduce and refine policies on lifelong learning (see Box 2).

Box 1.

POLICIES TO ENCOURAGE LIFELONG LEARNING

A study of efforts by 15 countries to develop lifelong learning through reform of qualifications systems reveals 9 broad policy responses that other countries can draw on to develop and refine their policies on lifelong learning:

Increased flexibility and responsiveness: Offering more customised training and greater choice. The focus is on being responsive to individuals, enterprises and the economy. The dominant ideas are targeting programmes to the individual and a learner-centred approach.

Motivating young people to learn: Stresses the importance of success in initial education and training, and becoming confident in basic skills. Introducing vocational elements into school courses is a possibility.

Linking education and work: Reflects a strong desire to see qualifications systems as a strong link between the education/training system and the labour market, and the economy more generally.

Facilitating open access to qualifications: This may mean drawing up specific routes to occupations or jobs, recognising a wide range of achievements and moving barriers for excluded groups.

Diversifying assessment processes: This often requires making assessment fit for its purpose and attempting to recognise all kinds of learning.

Making qualifications progressive: Learning is linked to job hierarchies, adult learning is expanded and relationships between qualifications are classified.

Making the qualifications system transparent: This often means reducing complexity and simplifying the way the qualifications system is presented, for instance by reducing the overlap between qualifications.

Reviewing funding and increasing efficiency: Reducing cost is the most obvious goal. Reviewing efficiency is another. Expanding private capacity for training is also an approach.

Better managing the qualifications system: This implies better co-ordination of the different institutions involved and increasing the local management of programmes.

The most successful of these mechanisms for achieving change include establishing a qualifications framework, providing credit transfer, creating new routes to qualifications, recognising informal and non-formal learning, and ensuring involvement of all stakeholders.

Establishing a qualifications framework is vital in terms of establishing a basis from which to measure improvements in quality, accessibility and recognition of qualifications. Without a framework that classifies and describes qualifications, whether as a general measure of learning (such as initial education) or specific skills for a particular sector, governments cannot judge whether the system is getting better at delivering lifelong learning.

Credit transfer is a particularly useful means of achieving lifelong learning in an efficient way. It enables people to gain credit for existing skills so as not to repeat work, and to use one qualification as a stepping stone to another, thus avoiding the trap of “dead end” qualifications. For credit transfer to work, policy makers need to put a value on a specific amount of learning or a specific skill, so that it can be transferred to another qualification.

One relatively simple and low-cost way of improving the overall skills base of the workforce without having to create new qualifications is *create new routes* to access existing qualifications. For example, if a particular type of technical education is only open to school-leavers with a specific high-school diploma,

Box 2.
**MECHANISMS TO TRIGGER
MORE AND BETTER
LIFELONG LEARNING**

These mechanisms, defined as conceptual links between qualifications systems and lifelong learning, are based on evidence of behavioural change within the main stakeholder groups. The most successful are highlighted in bold.

1. Communicating returns to learning for qualification.
2. Recognising skills for employability.
3. **Establishing a qualifications framework.**
4. Increasing learner choice in qualifications.
5. Clarifying learning pathways.
6. **Providing credit transfer.**
7. Increasing flexibility in learning programmes leading to qualifications.
8. **Creating new routes to qualifications.**
9. Lowering cost of qualification.
10. **Recognising non-formal and informal learning.**
11. Monitoring the qualifications system.
12. **Optimising stakeholder involvement in the qualifications system.**
13. Improving needs analysis methods so that qualifications are up-to-date.
14. Improving qualification use in recruitment.
15. Ensuring qualifications are portable.
16. Investing in pedagogical innovation.
17. Expressing qualifications as learning outcomes.
18. Improving co-ordination in the qualifications system.
19. Optimising quality assurance.
20. Improving information and guidance about qualifications systems.

Source: OECD (2007).

it could also be opened up to adults already working if they can demonstrate sufficient basic technical knowledge.

Recognising informal and non-formal learning is also important in creating a system where the elements of lifelong learning are recognised and portable. If workers are taught how to operate a particular machine or use particular software by a more experienced colleague, they may not acquire a paper qualification but have nonetheless deliberately acquired a specific work skill. Finding ways to recognise such skills can make them portable and avoid the cost in time and money of the person having to formally study them just to acquire the relevant piece of paper.

Optimising stakeholder involvement in the qualification system is also a powerful way of encouraging employers and employees to make more use of qualifications. If people want to learn online from home in their free time, then they should be able to do so (providing, of course that their qualification lends itself to this method). Employers might be willing to devote more resources to learning towards qualifications for their employees if they were directly involved in developing qualifications of use for their workforce.

Lifelong learning is an ongoing process, not a one-time major life choice which determines your entire future career. So if someone decides to change direction, or to put the learning curve on hold for a while, it should be possible to exit from the course at certain points while obtaining credit for the skills acquired to date.

It is a documented fact that those with most initial education are most likely to benefit from further learning and training during their working lives. A qualifications system for lifelong learning therefore must be sure to create entry points for those with few initial qualifications, for example by recognising basic employability skills learnt in the workplace such as ability to follow instructions or good timekeeping, even if these are not currently recognised by any existing qualification.

It may also be helpful to find ways to measure and recognise informal learning in the workplace, which can be particularly useful for those unwilling to engage with formal learning processes. Cost is also often an issue, particularly for the low-skilled who are also generally the lower-paid. Cost is not just a question of money, but also of the amount of time someone needs to spend acquiring a qualification, and how much of it is personal, rather than work, time.

And of course, policy makers need to monitor and measure whether the qualifications system is responding to the needs of individuals, employers and qualification providers and whether it is helping to deliver lifelong learning. Stakeholders need to be involved in developing the qualifications system so that they can explain what their needs are. And everyone needs to know that the system is delivering quality outcomes – a workforce with increased quality skills that are adaptable and portable and which meet employers' needs. ■

Where do we go from here?

The first thing policy makers need to do is to review their current policies for qualifications and lifelong learning to see how successful they are – some existing policies may already be delivering successful outcomes in this area and can be built on.

They could also usefully focus on the practical measures which countries have found to be most effective in producing results: credit transfer, involving stakeholders in crafting qualifications, recognising non-formal and informal as well as formal learning, making sure qualifications relate to one another, and offering new entry points, particularly for those less interested in qualifications and/or less interested in undertaking learning activities.

These responses are based on countries' experience so far, but if qualifications systems are to be effective in delivering lifelong learning we need more evidence about what works and what does not. And for that we need to develop ways to measure the lifelong learning results of different aspects of qualifications systems, and to compare the results of these measurements.

Experience suggests that the relationship between different aspects of qualifications systems is also important in determining how far they translate into lifelong learning results, but again we need to develop methods and measures to provide concrete evidence to enable governments to fine-tune their qualifications systems and policies. ■

For further information

For more information about the OECD's work on qualifications and lifelong learning, please contact:

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Many thanks to Mike Coles (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, United Kingdom), who worked closely with Patrick Werquin on the new OECD book, *Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning* (OECD, 2007).



For further reading

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