

**Workshop Session 2**  
**Carrying forward the policy debate**  
**David Rosen, Chair**

Balancing learner-centred approaches with demands for programme accountability (OECD Policy conclusions 4 and 5)

- *To whom and for what should programmes be held accountable?*
- *Given how little is known about adult learner progression, how can systems set appropriate benchmarks for learner achievement?*

The first question discussed was to **whom programmes should be accountable**.

A participant highlighted the importance of a holistic approach to accountability, addressing a range of stakeholders (e.g. government, local community, learners and instructors). Accountability systems should also include opportunities for self-reflection. The lack of interest in a broader notion of accountability reflects a top-down approach and may be problematic in the long run.

Another participant argued that programmes should be accountable to anyone who makes an investment in adult learning— whether in terms of time or money. Accountability implies complex relationships and there is a need to reconcile different needs, rather than to balance them (i.e. giving up one for the other). A participant distinguished between two approaches: the model of fear (aiming to solve temporary problems) or hope (based on a long-term vision, lifelong learning perspective). The system of accountability should be flexible.

The second question concerned **what programmes should be accountable for**.

There was general agreement about the complexity of the issue. A participant suggested that proposing simple solutions to such a complex question may have distorting effects. Different accountability measures are needed for different types of learners. For example, research on a US adult learning programme revealed that learners under 30 improved their literacy skills. However, learners over 30 did not improve their reading skills, but they did improve their reading practices (i.e. effectively applying literacy skills). This example illustrates that a single measure (e.g. qualification test measuring changes in reading skills) may not fit all types of learners.

A similar view was supported by other participants. One of them suggested that accountability measures should measure learner progress – for instance, in the case of very illiterate people it may be difficult to measure progress – but rather should examine the quality of the programme (although this raises another question: how do we define quality?).

Workshop participants also noted that different stakeholders may have different interests and therefore focus on different outcomes (e.g. ministries of education vs. ministries of labour).

Some of the discussion centred on the notion of ‘accountability’. A participant suggested that, literally speaking, ‘accountability’ does not necessarily involve the obligation to report every step taken. Similarly, another participant argued that, in principle, accountability does not necessarily need to focus on the process of teaching and learning. Rather, it could be based on trust, stability and long established traditions. In Anglo-Saxon countries, however, accountability is typically viewed like a ‘business contract’.

One participant raised the question whether it is really necessary and important to measure. While for the purposes of research on improving the quality of provision, the answer is certainly yes, this question also has an ethical dimension since access to basic skills can be considered a fundamental right.

A number of participants argued that given the labour and cost intensive nature of monitoring programme performance, measurements should be based on samples. One of the workshop participants suggested that accountability requirements should also be balanced with consideration of the efficient use of resources.

There was general agreement on the need to follow-up learners rather than just assessing immediate outcomes. In some cases the positive impact on a person's income can be observed only a few years later. Many participants agreed on the need of using samples when following-up learners and evaluating programmes. A participant described the example of a programme, at the end of which participants complete a satisfaction survey and a sample of learners is followed-up, but not every year.