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THEMATIC REVIEW ON ADULT LEARNING

A Progress Report

(Note by the Secretariat)

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(Note by the Secretariat)

1. The Thematic Review on Adult Learning was launched by the Education Committee at its meeting in November 1998 [DEELSA/ED(98)13]. The proposal for the Review was also discussed by the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee at its meeting in March 1999 and it requested that the Thematic Review be carried out as a joint undertaking of the two Committees. Both Committees expressed strong support for the Review and offered comments on the themes to be examined.
2. National representatives met in Paris on 16-17 June 1999 to discuss the revised proposed terms of reference [DEELSA/ED/WD(99)9/REV1] and to indicate interest in participating in the Thematic Review. A new version of the terms of reference taking into account their comments was presented to both Committees in Autumn 1999 [DEELSA/ED/WD(99)10].
3. Ten countries (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States) have confirmed their commitment to participate. As of September 2000, the Secretariat had visited four countries: Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Norway and Sweden.
4. This progress report has four sections: a brief background of the activity; a summary of project developments since the launching of the activity; the main themes of the review; and preliminary lessons from key features of adult learning systems observed in the four countries reviewed so far.
5. This document will be discussed by ELSAC at its meeting on 18-20 October 2000 and by the Education Committee at its meeting on 15-17 November 2000. A report will be made by the Secretariat at the Education Committee meeting on the discussion at ELSAC.
6. The Committee is invited to:
 - i) **NOTE** the developments to date; and
 - ii) **COMMENT** on the section on preliminary lessons.

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1. Background to the activity on adult learning

1. This thematic review was set in motion to contribute towards policy developments for making lifelong learning a reality for all. When they last met in January 1996, OECD Education Ministers, recognising that adults encountered problems in participating in learning, called on the OECD to “Review and explore new forms of teaching and learning appropriate for adults, whether employed, unemployed or retired.” In October 1997, OECD Labour Ministers amplified the message. They recognised the adverse labour market consequences that arise due to the lack of access to learning opportunities, and “underlined the importance of ensuring that lifelong learning opportunities are broadly accessible to all persons of working age, in order to sustain and increase their employability”.

2. In 1998, the OECD and the U.S. Department of Education co-organised an international conference, *How Adults Learn*, to review recent research results and practices with regard to teaching and learning methods adapted to the needs of adults. One of the conclusions was that a cross-country thematic review could be a valuable tool for identifying and analysing lessons from different national experiences, and understanding how policies and the institutional environment might be made more supportive of adult learning.

3. The Thematic Review on Adult Learning was launched by the Education Committee at its November 1998 meeting when it considered a proposal for such a review [DEELSA/ED(98)13]. The proposal was also discussed by the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee at its March 1999 meeting. Both Committees expressed strong support for the Review and offered comments on the themes to be examined. The Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee requested that the review be carried out as a joint undertaking of the two Committees. It was agreed that delegates from both committees should name individuals to participate in a meeting of national representatives to discuss in more detail the terms of reference (themes to be examined, background reports and practical arrangements) for the review.

4. National representatives met at the OECD on 16-17 June 1999 to discuss proposed terms of reference that incorporated comments of the two Committees [DEELSA/ED/WD(99)9], and to indicate interest in participating. Twenty-one countries participated in the meeting, in each case represented by a delegate from the Ministry of Education. Nine of these countries also sent representatives from the Ministry of Labour. There was fruitful discussion of all aspects of the terms of reference, including the practical arrangements. A revised version of the terms of reference taking into account comments from national representatives was presented to both Committees in Autumn 1999 [DEELSA/ED/WD(99)10].

5. The purpose of the review is to examine whether the quality and quantity of learning opportunities for adults are adequate, and how to improve access to adult learning through the analysis of:

- Patterns of participation and non-participation in adult learning.
- The nature of learning opportunities available to adults.
- The diversity of learning objectives and styles of potential adult learners.
- Diagnoses of the difficulties in developing adult learning strategies.
- Policies, programmes and institutional arrangements used by Member countries to promote adult learning.
- Options that can be seen as “good practices” under different circumstances.

6. Four themes were identified to address the broad types of problems that impinge on adults' participation in learning. These are: inadequate incentives and motivation for adults to learn; complex pathways between learning settings and a lack of transparency in signalling learning outcomes across a variety of formal and non-formal settings; inappropriate teaching and learning methods; and a lack of co-ordination between various public policies that directly or indirectly affect lifelong learning. The four themes are discussed in Section 3. Section 2 focuses on developments to date since the launching of the activity.

2. Developments to date

7. The countries currently participating in the review will be covered in the Comparative Report to be presented to both the Education and the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committees.

8. The review process involves the following steps:

- In each participating country, authorities nominate a National Co-ordinator to oversee the country's participation. An *ad hoc* steering group comprising representatives from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, other ministries, research institutions and other key actors may be appointed to support the National Co-ordinator. A first visit by the Secretariat allows discussion with the National Co-ordinator and, if necessary, with the Steering Group, of all practical details of the review.
- Before the visit by the review team, the reviewed country produces a Background Report providing an overview of adult learning. The objective is to give to the expert team all information needed to get the analysis underway.
- The expert team, composed of an external rapporteur, two external experts and two OECD Secretariat members, visits the country for about ten days to obtain an overview of the key issues concerning adult learning in the context of education and the labour market.
- After the visit, the rapporteur, with the help of the expert team, drafts a Country Note. It focuses on the analysis of questions and issues which are most relevant for the country concerning the four themes developed below.
- After having visited the participating countries, the OECD Secretariat prepares a Comparative Report based on the Country Background Reports, the Country Notes and comparative statistics collected.

9. As of September 2000, the Secretariat had visited four countries: Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Norway and Sweden. Twelve adult learning experts and researchers from eleven different OECD countries have taken part in the process to date. The involvement of a wide range of participants has provided an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and perspectives on issues concerning adult learning.

10. The provisional timeline for visits to the six remaining countries is the following: Denmark (7-14 November 2000); Canada (January 2001); Finland (January-February 2001); Portugal (March 2001); the United States (April 2001); and Hungary (Spring 2001).

11. The description of the activity and three Newsletters on progress so far can be consulted on the OECD Web site (<http://www.oecd.org/els/edu/>). Detailed programmes and a list of people met and organisations visited are also available. The Background Reports on England and Switzerland are on the Web site and those on Norway and Sweden are in the process of finalisation. The Country Notes on each of the four countries are progressing and will be on the Website as soon as possible.

Project timetable

12. Given that the visits for the initial ten countries will end mid-2001, the Secretariat proposes the following timetable:

April 2001	Chapter 1 in <i>Education Policy Analysis</i> will present some preliminary lessons from the different Thematic Reviews, including the Thematic Review on Adult Learning, as part of the documentation prepared for the meeting of Ministers of Education.
Spring 2001	Oral presentation to the ELSA Committee of the latest developments. Possible organisation of another meeting of national representatives.
Autumn 2001	Presentation to the Education and ELSA Committees of an extended draft outline for the Comparative Report. Decisions about the follow-up of the activity should be made concerning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The drafting and dissemination plan of the Comparative Report; • The launching of a second round, should a sufficient number of countries decide to participate.

3. Main themes of the review

Theme 1: How can government, the social partners and other actors improve the incentives and motivation for adults to learn?

13. Weak incentives and motivation for individuals and the lack of sufficient investment by employers in learning are some central causes of low participation in learning activities. Motivation depends to a great extent on the usefulness of training, whether it is for personal or professional reasons. Non-participation may also result from a lack of motivation due to social or work settings that do not value learning, or due to a desire on the part of individuals to avoid repeating failures in initial education.

14. Particular questions that are examined under this theme include: To what extent are low participation levels in various forms of adult learning due to deteriorating or uncertain rates of economic returns? Are there examples of policies or practices that have improved participation by strengthening economic returns and reducing the degree of uncertainty? What configuration of labour market institutions facilitate or hinder learning opportunities and their returns? What approaches have proven effective in strengthening the incentives and motivation for the most disadvantaged to participate in learning? What are some of the more fruitful approaches to improving incentives for enterprises, governments, and individuals to invest in adult learning? How well developed are systems for assessing and measuring learning

outcomes? What are the means for verifying skills, competencies and knowledge that have been acquired outside formal learning settings?

Theme 2: Promoting an integrated approach to the provision of, and participation in, adult learning

15. Adult learning is offered by many providers which usually operate in isolation from one another and at different levels (formal education, the workplace, the home or elsewhere). There is no evidence of a “holistic” approach to adult learning that provides a basis for addressing *the needs of all adults*. The implementation of an enabling strategy for adult learning requires a plurality of approaches to promoting learning.

16. Particular questions that are examined under this theme include: What is being done or what can be done to ensure that would-be learners have easy access to complete and reliable information and guidance on the full range of learning opportunities? When learning opportunities are based on existing institutions, how easy or difficult is it for adults to access and choose from them? Do providers of adult learning also provide the collateral support services that can reduce barriers to participation (e.g. transportation, child-care services and health services)? What factors inhibit or encourage learning in combination with other activities such as work or job search? What role do businesses play in inhibiting or encouraging learning? How are outcomes from different learning settings assessed and recognised? To what extent are outcomes from one setting (e.g. university continuing education) signalled in a language that has currency in another setting (e.g. the workplace)?

Theme 3: Improving the quality, pedagogy and variety of learning provision

17. The central consideration under this theme is whether the content, pedagogy and methods of delivery of adult learning activities are adapted to the learning needs and styles of adults as well as whether the institutional setting is appropriate.

18. Particular questions that are examined under this theme include: In what ways do the quality, pedagogy and variety of learning opportunities impinge on participation by those adults judged to be most in need? Are there particular approaches (e.g. non-classroom learning contexts such as distance and open learning, monitoring and self-help groups, ICT-based instruction) that appear to be under-utilised? How might they be applied more widely? How can the workplace be reinforced as an important setting for learning by the least qualified? Under what conditions do “leisure” and other non-vocationally oriented learning activities provide a useful basis for learning that is relevant to work, or otherwise improve the accessibility of vocational activities? How do governments ensure that training providers conform to quality standards, such as those under the authority of ISO (Information Systems Organisation)? What is the impact of different quality standards on the capacity and willingness of training providers to meet diverse learning needs?

Theme 4: Improving policy coherence and effectiveness

19. Adult education and training has grown, but remains a weak sector structurally and financially. The fragmentation in institutional arrangements is reflected in a lack of coherence and co-ordination at the policy level. First, there is a lack of *vertical* integration: adult education and training programmes are not well integrated with programmes in formal learning at the initial, secondary or tertiary levels and often are not well integrated with the realities of the labour market. Second, there is a need for *horizontal* integration: education and training policies need to be co-ordinated with other policies (i.e. employment, social, economic and environmental). This requires a higher degree of co-operation than currently exists between public and private actors involved.

20. Particular questions that are examined under this theme include: Do policymakers have the means for identifying and addressing the learning needs of adults or the related needs for support services (transportation, childcare and health services)? How can the provision of support services be more effectively co-ordinated? Most adult learning is not instruction-led and occurs in non-formal settings such as the workplace and the community. What are the barriers to a co-ordinated focus across different policy fields? Are there examples of good practices for combating policy fragmentation? The social partners play an important role in both the supply and demand for learning opportunities. What are some of the more effective approaches for improving co-ordination in policy development and delivery between governments and the social partners? How might governments and the social partners support and encourage systematic linkages between the research community and practitioners, not only in classroom-based adult education, but also in other learning contexts?

4. What preliminary lessons and policy issues can be drawn at this stage?

21. With only four countries visited so far, it is too early to offer in-depth responses to the themes. Instead, based on the information gathered from the country visits, some preliminary lessons of what could be key features of effective adult learning policies have been drawn. These are grouped under three main categories that distinguish between a conducive environment, features of the adult learning system and adult learning practices.

A. *Conducive environment*

22. The context or environment within which adult learning policies take place is as important as the policies themselves. The educational attainment of the population, the effectiveness of the initial education system, the political and social relevance granted to lifelong learning and skills upgrading render the contextual environment central to the design of adult learning policies. The following features of the contextual environment are particularly important.

Effective, flexible and interconnected initial and further education systems

23. The initial education system must give students broad-based knowledge and provide a solid background to build upon through further education and training. It should provide young people with the opportunity of learning how to learn so that adult learning processes are easier. Furthermore, it should aim towards the attainment of at least upper secondary education by all students. The structure should allow people to leave the initial education system with a broad range of future possibilities to resume learning, and ensure they are correctly informed of the clear pathways available to re-enter the education system. This implies a high degree of flexibility and interconnection between the initial and further education and training systems.

24. All the countries visited have implemented different programmes to target adults who are illiterate, who have not completed upper secondary education or whose skill levels are regarded as too low. Two examples are the “Reading and Spelling Shop”, set-up and run by the Workers Educational Association in Norway and the possibility included in the Swiss Federal Law on vocational training (Article 41) to resume vocational training. In these cases, adult learning is viewed as having a *remedial* objective.

A culture of learning

25. A culture of lifelong learning has to be promoted. It should also ensure that all students leave the initial education system with a good knowledge of their language and how to use it so the return to the adult learning system is easier. Some examples of the promotion of a learning culture include the encouragement of the use of literacy in the private context, through reading or subtitled movies, which are

strong determinants of the learning and literacy of adults. From this perspective, the role of adult learning is one of the *maintenance and upgrading* of the existing skill base.

A conducive socio-economic environment

26. The recognition of the need for the continual upgrading of the skills of adults is the first basic step for a positive learning environment. The more convinced governments and the social partners are, the more conducive the socio-economic environment is likely to be for promoting adult learning. It is the challenge of the Competence Reform launched in 1999 in Norway and of the Adult Learning Initiative set in motion in 1997 in Sweden to expand opportunities for all adults, in and outside the labour market, to pursue continual learning. Better interaction between the education system and the workplace is important as well as formal recognition that the workplace is a place of learning. This also implies policy coherence and co-ordination of adult learning policies with other public and private initiatives, at a national, regional and local level. The recognition of the need for upskilling by the government is evident from the large number of initiatives launched by the four countries visited so far.

B. *Emerging features of an improved adult learning system*

27. The following are not exclusive features of an adult learning system, but they have been observed in the different countries visited. The first feature is that adult learning is backed financially by a wide range of actors, though the resources are often inadequate. Financial aspects, viewed in terms of the cost of training as well as in terms of the opportunity cost implicit in the time spent in training, should not pose barriers to access adult learning opportunities. In general, countries offer different financial mechanisms such as grants or subsidies, individual learning accounts or tax breaks to encourage training, but little is known about their impact. In Sweden, regulation supports the right of adults to education by ensuring the availability of learning time for adults. Norway is in the process of implementing an individual's right to leave of absence to undertake training and the United Kingdom will likely introduce individual learning accounts to help finance adult learning.

Simplicity and guidance

28. Adult learning systems can be simple, directed towards providing specific offerings, such as basic adult literacy and primary and secondary education, or complex and offer a wide array of choices in terms of courses and structure. In the first case, there is not a strong need for a well-developed guidance system. In the case of a complex system, however, an orientation or guidance system is essential to help adults find their way through the different options available. Institutions serving as brokers or intermediaries between education, industry and public institutions can help (e.g. Resource Centres in Norway).

Approaching the "difficult to reach" group

29. As one of the major concerns of adult learning is to target those people who traditionally do not participate in learning, positive experiences have tried to initially separate learning from the assessment of outcomes. For some adults, especially those who have experienced failure in or of the school system, to resume learning has to be approached as a "fun" activity, and not only be seen as connected to better wages or job promotions (e.g. Day High Schools in Norway). A "soft entrance" into learning through introductory or orientation courses on how to learn or short seminar courses without grades, can ease the transition into the adult learning process. By keeping expectations as open as possible, the risk of frustration with learning is diminished. Such is the case of the Nordic Study Circles (in Sweden and Norway), the Folk High Schools in Norway, the School-clubs Migros in Switzerland and the Employee Development and Assistance Programme (EDAP) implemented by Ford in the United Kingdom.

Recognition of prior learning and certification

30. The recognition of prior learning experiences is a way to motivate adults to resume learning because it ensures that already acquired skills and knowledge are taken into account. It is an important tool to increase adult participation as well as to be cost effective and avoid unnecessary education. It also lays stress on the importance of the workplace as a learning setting, especially enabling informal learning through on-the-job training (e.g. the Investors in People standard in the United Kingdom). Forms of accreditation of non-formal learning are being implemented in the four countries visited so far, though it is still too early to assess their effectiveness. In Norway, the government presented a bill in May 2000 proposing a legal amendment giving universities and university colleges the right to admit students without formal entrance qualifications on the basis of age (25 years or more) and non-formal learning. The bill also contains a proposal that recognition of non-formal learning may lead to a shortening of studies. In Sweden, the National Agency for Higher Education assesses foreign education in connection with admissions to most programmes at universities and university colleges and for suitability for professional practice.

31. Additionally, the certification of acquired skills facilitates the continuation of further studies and can contribute to the recognition of the learning experience in the labour market.

Modularization

32. Modularization is a system in which training programmes are constructed based on building blocks. Each program is composed of a group of complementary modules that are associated to a type of occupation. The construction of modules is based on an analysis of the needs of the labour market and is validated by professionals. In light of the advantages that the system of modularization poses for adult learners, a number of countries are adopting it. It allows for faster adjustment to labour market developments as well as to the specific needs of adults. It offers flexibility by allowing for the attainment of partial qualifications or the slow modular completion of specific degrees. It also implies stronger collaboration between education and labour market actors in the design of the system. It has been set into motion in Norway and is being tested in a 3-year pilot project in Switzerland. Crucial aspects of this project include the advantage of a "top-down" approach from professionals to schools and the need for co-operation between all the actors involved.

Training as an effective stepping stone for a job

33. Training can be a key tool for job seekers. As such, active labour market policies (ALMPs) should include **effective** training programmes as one measure for the unemployed to become job ready. It should not be perceived only as conditional on receiving benefits, but as a tool to improve employability. In a tight labour market with numerous job vacancies, employment agencies should help job seekers to fill the vacancies through flexible training courses tailored to individual needs. This method is implemented in some employment agencies in Norway. It is modular and individual-based. Drop-outs are almost non-existent. The Vaggeryd Model in Sweden is also a good example of how vocational training can be linked and closely aligned with specific labour market needs.

The workplace as the locus for competence building

34. Businesses play an essential role in encouraging and providing adult education and training. In the four countries visited so far, there is formal recognition of the crucial role of the workplace as a place for learning and of on-the-job training in competence building. But, it is difficult to determine the degree of implementation of training opportunities within firms. Human resources strategies within firms are often not very transparent and evaluations are difficult. There are, however, a number of shared concerns.

SMEs offer fewer training opportunities for their workers. Low skilled workers are given far fewer possibilities to upgrade their skills. Firms have difficulties in developing competence-based learning systems and there is often little incentive for them to do so due to market failures such as “cherry-picking”. Various initiatives reviewed in some firms during the country visits were in fact promising and innovative practices. These include: in a public firm becoming private, preparing low skilled workers to be competitive in the labour market; in a chemical company, introducing an internal pay incentive scheme based on seven levels of competence; in an aluminium firm, moving from five shifts to six in order to make room for ten days of training a year for each worker; and developing individual competence accounts.

Partnership of private and public systems

35. The most effective policies combine the participation of public and private systems. This can facilitate access of adults in different regions, or those who would not have the opportunity unless publicly provided. The public sector can take advantage of the trainers who are already in the market through financial arrangements. All countries visited have a degree of interaction between private and public providers. Even in Switzerland, where adult training providers are mainly private, the creation of a Forum to co-ordinate public (federal and cantonal) and private actors is on the top of the adult learning policy agenda.

C. *Adult learning practices and pedagogy*

36. Learning pedagogy should be specifically focused toward adult learning needs. This implies the need for specific training of trainers and specific training methodologies (both formal and informal learning), which is more likely to provide incentives for adults to participate in learning activities. Teaching practices should be less classroom based and more interactive, not only in teaching methods but also in terms of the facilities. Furthermore, the setting and the availability of complementary services are vital to stimulate adult participation.

Flexibility

37. Flexibility is key for adult learners. This implies offering the possibility for each adult to progress at his/her own pace and select his/her own schedule. ICT technologies can facilitate this. In addition, distance learning is an available option (e.g. Distance Education Networks in Norway at the university level). The system can also rely on ICT, but should let the opportunity for people who do not have access to Internet to use regular mail (Open University in England).

New Technologies

38. The use of new technologies has become a venue to reach adults for a number of reasons. Adults want to improve their technological skills and all countries have included information technology courses in their syllabus. At the same time, the growth of ICT has opened up new methods of teaching and learning and, therefore, broadened the possibilities of learning. The video conference learning unit set up in the Nammo explosive factory in Sweden has the objective of bringing into the system the more difficult to reach. The University for Industry (Ufi) in the United Kingdom is a new initiative designed to provide a national on-line learning network. The objectives are to stimulate demand for lifelong learning amongst businesses and individuals and promote the availability of, and improve access to, relevant, high quality and innovative learning, in particular through the use of information and communications technologies.

Quality assurance

39. More diverse and flexible learning processes must also assure quality. Such quality assurance mechanisms can help people to select among different learning providers. Switzerland has experience with such a system implemented by public purchasers to select among private providers (System EDUQUA in use in the German-speaking cantons). Accreditation through international quality standards (ISO or EQUIS) can help firms develop internal competence-based learning processes.

Logistic support

40. Finally, for adults to be able to benefit from learning opportunities, the right support services are essential. This includes taking into account family and job responsibilities. These include:

- Time schedules that are complementary to work hours and to children's school hours.
- Appropriate physical facilities.
- Easy access to transport.
- Day-care facilities for children.