

Executive Summary

The challenge

Too many adults still fail to acquire even basic skills, with enormous effects on their individual lives and on their countries' economic and social well-being. In the majority of the 23 countries participating in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), between 14 and 23% of adults were able to meet only the lowest standards of literacy and numeracy proficiency (Level 1). Among the countries participating in this study, the percentage of adults not meeting this standard ranges from a low of 8% to a high of 43% (OECD and Statistics Canada, 1997). The more recent Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) (OECD and Statistics Canada, 2005¹), which included six countries and regions, found that between one-third and two-thirds of adult populations do not attain Level 3, considered by many as the “suitable minimum” for meeting the demands of daily and work life (see Annex 1 for an explanation of proficiency levels in these international surveys).

The consequences of low foundation skills² span the economic, health and social well-being of individuals, families and communities. Communities as well as individuals with foundation skill needs are thus likely to realise significant economic and social benefits in addressing these challenges.

In the last decade, countries have developed new pathways for progression, defined key competencies, and developed new curricula. But for the most part, policies to shape classroom teaching and learning are

¹ OECD and Statistics Canada (1997), *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society: Further Results from the International Adult Literacy Survey*, OECD, Paris. OECD and Statistics Canada (2005), *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, OECD, Paris.

² The term “foundation skills” is used interchangeably with “language, literacy and numeracy skills” in this report.

limited to blunt instruments. The classroom is thus seen as a “black box” – because so much of the activity and interface of teaching, learning and assessment is literally hidden from wider view beyond the classroom door. This study aims to get inside the black box of adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) provision.

The main report includes three sections:

- Section I presents the *context and conditions* of adult LLN provision. It draws upon country background reports from nine countries, including Australia, Belgium (Flemish Community), Denmark, England, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Spain and the United States. International surveys, including the IALS and the more recent Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (OECD and Statistics Canada, 2005), also help to set out the scale of the challenge across countries.
- Section II delves directly into the *black box of teaching, learning and assessment*. It draws upon *case studies* of exemplary practice and *literature reviews* from four linguistic traditions (English, French, German and Spanish). Seven countries contributed cases studies, including Belgium (Flemish Community), Denmark, England, France, Norway, Scotland and the United States.
- Section III offers a *broad framework for strengthening policy and practice* across the sector and for *building the evidence base*. It also suggests ways in which policy might support the effective practices identified in this study across the adult LLN sector.

The full-length country background reports, case studies and literature reviews are available on the OECD website (see list of annexes in the Table of Contents).

Section I: Context and conditions

Chapter 1 lays out the motivation and methodologies for the report. The study’s initial foray into the black box started with a focus on “formative assessment” within adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) classrooms. Formative assessment refers to the frequent assessment of learner understanding and progress to identify needs and shape teaching. The interest in formative assessment follows on very positive results in the compulsory school sector. The effects are consistent across different age groups (school-age and university learners), subjects and in the different countries included in major reviews. Yet there have been few efforts to date to study the impact or implementation of formative assessment in adult LLN contexts.

Understanding the population of adult LLN learners

Chapter 2 highlights findings from different international and national surveys and studies, emphasising the overall scale of the challenge for systems. These studies have also provided valuable information on the *features of populations* most in need. Other studies have identified the *consequences of low foundation skills* on economic, health and social well-being of individuals, families and communities.

Aligning policy and practice

Adult LLN provision has traditionally been set apart from mainstream education at the compulsory and university levels, and has been largely independent of policy oversight. More recently, policies have turned attention to shaping learning content and progression, and holding programmes accountable for results. These newer policy approaches attempt to create greater *programme transparency* and *coherence*. But critics charge that these newer, more standardised approaches also set out narrowly defined learning objectives. Learners may miss the chance to develop capacities for dealing with increasing levels of complexity and for greater independence.

Chapter 3 explores the different approaches countries participating in the OECD study have taken to balancing and aligning policies that create greater *standardisation* with those that promote greater *individualisation* of teaching, learning and assessment.

Strengthening professionalism

Chapter 4 explores the *conditions of employment, training and wider staff support*. Instructors need strong subject-matter and pedagogical expertise and skills in assessment, as well as softer skills, such as humour, patience, flexibility, and empathy.

Building an instructional workforce that can meet such high expectations is particularly challenging, given:

- Constrained financial resources in this sector.
- Precarious employment situations for many instructors, leading to high turnover.
- The relative lack of instructors holding specialist qualifications for teaching adult LLN learners (although some countries and regions have recently introduced new qualification requirements).

- A heavy dependence on volunteer staff.
- The part-time status of many instructors, making it difficult for staff to find time to discuss innovation or to reflect on practice.

Section II: Inside the black box

The chapters in Section II delve directly into the black box of adult LLN learning. They draw upon the reviews of literature and case studies of exemplary practice conducted for this report. This research underlines the combined importance of different elements – rather than discrete practices or tools – in promoting learner progress. It can be seen as a process, which begins as soon as learners enter a programme and continues throughout a series of steps. The chapters are organised to reflect learner progression.

The steps of the learning journey include:

- *Diagnosis of learning needs*, and establishment of learners' motivations and goals.
- The development of strong *relationships within the classroom*, through dialogue and peer assessment.
- The use of *assessment to provide information on learning*, and to be used as feedback by learners and instructors to modify teaching and learning activities. Instructors develop effective questioning techniques, and set tasks and challenges at the right level to help learners address gaps.
- A focus on *building learner autonomy*, including skills for self-assessment and for addressing the literacy and numeracy tasks of daily life independently.
- *Tracking of learner progress* toward goals and recognition of achievement.

The case study sites

Chapter 5 introduces the OECD case studies of exemplary practice. They include programmes offering primary or secondary school certification; community-based programmes not providing formal certification; programmes for immigrant and refugee learners; and, a prison-based programme.

First steps: diagnosing learning needs and setting goals

When adult LLN learners first enter a new programme, they very typically have an initial interview to discuss their goals and motivations for learning, and how they expect they will use new skills in their daily lives. This first meeting may also include a diagnostic assessment to identify learners strengths and any potential barriers to learning (such as a disability), and to place them at an appropriate level. As a follow-up instructors and new learners set out goals for learning in a written document (an individual learning plan or contract). These first steps in the learning journey set the tone and direction for learning.

Relationships within the classroom: dialogue and peer assessment

The second step of the OECD staircase highlights the centrality of relationships within the classroom, including dialogue and peer assessment in adult LLN learning. The following five elements emerge from the OECD case studies and reviews of the international literature as important for effective dialogue in adult LLN settings:

1. Building rapport and creating a “safe” environment
2. Using dialogue to promote participatory and democratic learning
3. Negotiating learning goals and methods
4. Structuring dialogue to meet specific learning goals
5. Using dialogue to establish what learners do and do not know and to adjust teaching to meet identified learning needs.

Together, the five elements help to ensure that dialogue enriches the learning process.

Techniques: feedback, questioning, and scaffolding

The third step in the OECD staircase explores the formative assessment techniques of feedback, questioning and scaffolding in the adult LLN context. These techniques are used to uncover learner understanding, to help instructors pitch learning to the right level, and to help learners progressively improve their skills.

Research drawing on controlled studies at school and university levels points to the significant learning gains associated with these techniques. The lack of research featuring controlled studies in the adult LLN sector, on the other hand, has meant that little is known about the impact of different formative assessment techniques, or how they should be adjusted to meet the needs of learners in this population.

Developing learner autonomy

The fourth step in the OECD staircase explores the development of learner autonomy. Efforts to build autonomy begin with learners' partnership in the assessment and learning process. Instructors in the OECD case study sites emphasised the importance of helping learners to “own” the assessment and learning process, and to develop the confidence to use their own judgment regarding the quality of their work, and for identifying gaps in their learning. These skills are also important as learners engage in non-formal and informal learning.

Recognition of learner progress

Recognition of learner progress is the final of the five steps for learning in the OECD staircase – although of course not the final step in the learning journey. The chapter starts with an exploration of “theories of adult learner progression” – how learners move toward higher-level skills for critical analysis and autonomy. The adult LLN programmes featured in the study place the focus on “measuring the distance travelled” throughout the learning journey.

Policies regarding summative assessment and certification vary from country to country. Summative assessments are usually criterion-referenced – measuring learner progress against established standards, rather than against peers. In all countries, learners have the option of taking tests when they are ready, or to re-take a test if necessary. Thus, they are able to improve upon results in a formative way. The summative assessments themselves may rely upon standardised examinations, or may allow programmes to assess learner attainment of individual goals.

Section III: Conclusions

The study identifies seven interrelated principles, which may serve as a broad framework for strengthening policy and practice and for building the evidence base. They are to:

1. *Promote active debate on the nature of teaching, learning and assessment.*
2. *Strengthen professionalism.*
3. *Balance structure and flexibility: formative assessment as a framework.*
4. *Strengthen learner-centred approaches.*

5. *Diversify and deepen approaches to assessment and programme evaluation for accountability.*
6. *Devote the necessary resources: people, time and money.*
7. *Strengthen the knowledge-base.*