

Executive Summary

Background and rationale

Since the 1970s, the evolution of the OECD economies and societies, in particular the advent of information technologies, has made lifelong learning a key goal for education and training policy. Progress in technology and international economic integration is rapidly changing the economic landscape and putting an ever greater premium on the need to innovate, improve productivity and to adjust to structural changes painlessly. In this context, the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) of 12 OECD countries provided a sobering finding: at least one-quarter of the adult population fails to reach the third of the five literacy levels, which many experts regard as the minimum level of competence needed to cope adequately with the complex demands of everyday life and work. These results have been confirmed by follow-up surveys in 22 countries/regions. A population with this level of skills can hardly be expected to adapt rapidly and respond innovatively to the ongoing structural changes. “Lifelong learning for all” is a response to this challenge. This policy goal was identified by a meeting of OECD Education Ministers in 1996 (Lifelong Learning for All, OECD, 1996) and also echoed in publications by UNESCO and the European Commission.

The benefits of lifelong learning

A number of important socio-economic forces are pushing for the lifelong learning approach. The economic rationale for lifelong learning comes from two principal sources. First, with the increasing importance of knowledge-based economy and the progressive demise of Taylorism or Fordism (OECD 1988), the threshold of skills demanded by the employers is being constantly raised. There is a relative decline in demand for low-level skills. Second, as firms respond to a more volatile market and shorter product cycles, career jobs are fewer and individuals experience more frequent changes in jobs over the working life. The shelf-life of skills is shorter. There is a need for continuous renewal and updating of skills, which is essential for structural adjustment, productivity growth, innovation and effective reallocation of human resources.

On a broader, societal, level, the large structural changes threaten a new polarisation between the knowledge “haves” and “have-nots”. The distribution of learning opportunities is quite uneven. Unemployed individuals have fewer learning opportunities than the employed; those in small and medium-size firms have poorer access than employees of larger firms; opportunities for those with secondary school education or less are significantly fewer than for those with post-secondary education; women are at a relative disadvantage compared to men. The large earnings gaps between those with and without post-secondary education, furthermore, widen over the lifetime. These discrepancies can damage the very basis of democracy.

Strategies for lifelong learning respond to the convergence between the economic imperative dictated by the needs of the knowledge society and the societal need to promote social cohesion by providing long-term benefits for the individual, the enterprise, the economy and the society more generally. For the individual, lifelong learning emphasises creativity, initiative and responsiveness – attributes which contribute to self-fulfilment, higher earnings and employment, and to innovation and productivity. The skills and competence of the workforce are a major factor in economic performance and success at the enterprise level. For the economy, there is a positive relationship between educational attainment and economic growth.

The OECD approach to lifelong learning

The OECD approach to lifelong learning, set out in a number of publications [OECD (1996, 1999, 2001, and 2004)], represents a major departure from the 1970s. It adopts a more comprehensive view that covers all purposeful learning activity, from the cradle to the grave, that aims to improve knowledge and competencies for all individuals *who wish to participate* in learning activities. The concept has four main features:

A systemic view: This is the most distinguishing feature of lifelong learning – all competing approaches to education policy are sector-specific. 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, non-formal, and informal learning*.

Centrality of the learner: This requires a shift of attention from a supply-side focus, for example on formal institutional arrangements for learning, to the demand side of meeting learner needs.

Motivation to learn 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 policy: The lifecycle view recognises the multiple goals of education – such as personal development, knowledge development, economic, social and cultural objectives – and that the priorities among these objectives may change over the course of an individual’s lifetime.

Lifelong learning and qualifications systems

Lifelong learning is a vast agenda. Since 1996 the Education Committee’s programme of work has systematically explored various aspects of lifelong learning strategies, especially on systemic features of lifelong learning. There are a range of policies in the economic and social domain that can be used to influence lifelong learning.

The link between lifelong learning and qualifications systems is evident from two features of lifelong learning: its systemic nature and its emphasis on all forms of learning, formal, non-formal and informal. A qualifications system, whether formally or implicitly, articulates which forms of learning form part of the qualifications systems and how they are standardised, recognised and valued by individuals, the economy and society. Individuals use the system to decide on their learning activities. A qualifications system can facilitate the individual in navigating along these pathways or can be a deterrent, depending on what incentives or disincentives it provides.

Country involvement and process

The Committee launched an activity in 2001 to explore the links between the qualifications system and lifelong learning. Given the labour market connections, the activity was also endorsed by the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee. The purpose of the activity was to investigate how different national qualifications systems influence the overall volume of lifelong learning, its quality and distribution among different classes of learners. Based on this investigation, the activity aimed to identify what actions countries can take in designing and managing their qualifications system to promote lifelong learning.

In spring 2001, representatives from 22 OECD countries and representatives of five international organisations met to discuss the purpose and scope of the activity. On the basis of a concepts paper, an activity proposal and a guideline for preparation of country background reports, 15 countries (Belgium [French Community], Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) agreed to participate in the work. A number of international organisations agreed to monitor the work: the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), the European Commission, the European Training Foundation, the International Labour Organization, and the World Bank. Several other countries agreed to participate at a later stage. The work was resumed in 2004 after an interruption of a year. Given the very complex and extensive nature of the work, it was agreed to create three country networks to prepare papers on specific topics. These reports and Secretariat drafts of a synthesis report were discussed at twice-yearly workshops during 2004-2005. A first complete draft was circulated to the Committee in March 2006.

There is a link between qualifications systems and lifelong learning

Under-researched but this link is possibly an under-researched area

Most educational policy makers believe that there is a link between qualifications systems and lifelong learning; however such a link has never been proven. This is because, whilst a lot is known about lifelong learning and about qualifications systems, until now the middle ground has been largely unexplored territory. Throughout this publication the focus is on this middle ground and the question is: how can national qualifications systems promote lifelong learning in terms of quantity, quality, efficiency and equitable distribution of learning opportunities?

The theoretical links between national qualifications systems and lifelong learning are termed *mechanisms* and each one should have the capacity to change the qualifications system to make it more conducive to lifelong learning. If such mechanisms can be identified, understood and then transformed into concrete robust relationships, policy makers will be provided with a rationale for reforming qualifications systems with lifelong learning benefits in mind.

Enabling policy learning

For some time countries have been trying to develop lifelong learning through reforming qualifications systems. Existing and planned policy from 15 countries has been analysed and classified into 9 generalised policy responses. They do not represent a model

but an aggregation of all existing policies linking qualifications systems and lifelong learning. Because these nine policy responses are generic, they can be used for policy learning among countries.

The value of this list is that it represents a set of policy responses countries have considered and the list can be used for review of the existing and planned policies within a country:

1. Increase flexibility and responsiveness.
2. Motivate young people to learn.
3. Link education and work.
4. Facilitate open access to qualifications.
5. Diversify assessment processes.
6. Make qualifications progressive.
7. Make the qualifications system transparent.
8. Review funding and increase efficiency.
9. Better manage the qualifications system.

Changing behaviour of stakeholders

If lifelong learning is to develop further in countries, then the patterns of behaviour of individuals, employers as well as learning and qualification providers will need to change. Qualifications systems may play a role in the process of changing behaviour and the qualification-based factors that might influence behaviour are analysed by reviewing empirical evidence and theoretical literature that relates to national qualifications systems. An evaluation of the drivers of change influencing lifelong learning and the barriers to learning that confront individuals and employers, as well as learning and qualification providers, generates mechanisms that can be used to optimise the impact of lifelong learning policies.

The analysis so far shows that there is significant qualitative evidence that the learning behaviours of individuals, employers and providers of learning and qualifications are directly and indirectly influenced by the kind of qualifications system operating in the country. The analysis leads to the identification of specific changes in terms of structure or operating conditions, which will in turn change the likelihood of each of these groups participating in, using and providing qualifications. These change agents have been labelled mechanisms and now it is possible, using the evidence, to support the theoretical idea with concrete evidence and lay out 20 mechanisms for consideration as tools to strengthen policy responses for improving lifelong learning into positive outcomes. The 20 mechanisms are:

1. Communicating returns to learning for qualification.
2. Recognising skills for employability.
3. Establishing qualifications frameworks.
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.

The two concepts of “**policy responses**” and “**mechanism**” are distinct. Policy responses are broad categories of policies which are currently being used by countries to address the pressures for change in the qualifications system. A mechanism is a conceptual link between the qualifications systems and lifelong learning that is based on the analysis of evidence of behavioural change of the main stakeholder groups. The evidence for these mechanisms comes from both the country background reports and the available research literature.

The 20 mechanisms can be classified using the different policy responses in an attempt to see how the evidence for mechanisms can provide useful tools for policy makers as they introduce and refine policies for lifelong learning.

Adding value to the evidence

The 20 mechanisms are a means by which qualifications systems can be more conducive to lifelong learning. National qualifications systems will not include all mechanisms. This is because every national qualifications system is unique and the functioning of mechanisms will be influenced by the conditions operating the qualifications system. Therefore it is not always possible to generalise about the strength of these mechanisms in bringing about more lifelong learning. However, by linking the mechanisms to the generic policy responses, we can get an idea about which mechanisms are likely to have a strong effect.

It has been possible to make a first approach on how strong the effect of a mechanism might be on a policy response. It is possible to separate *strong* mechanisms from mechanisms having a *supporting*, but not necessarily strong, role and those having no role at all. There is another way of considering the effect of a mechanism, this time on other mechanisms rather than directly on policy responses. Three are believed to have a catalytic role on some of the other mechanisms and are called *change mechanisms*.

Combining the different ways of analysing the effect of mechanisms leads to identify some particularly powerful mechanisms:

- Five highly ranked strong mechanisms: *Providing credit transfer; Optimising stakeholder involvement in the qualifications system; Recognising non-formal and informal learning; Establishing a qualifications framework; and Creating new routes to qualifications.*
- Three change mechanisms: *Establishing qualifications frameworks; Communicating returns to learning for qualifications; and Investing in pedagogical innovation.*
- Five highly ranked supporting mechanisms: *Monitoring the qualifications system; Establishing qualifications frameworks; Investing in pedagogical innovation; Expressing qualifications as learning outcomes; and Improving information and guidance about qualifications systems.*

Same words: same meaning?

Common understanding of the main elements of a qualifications system is an issue. Almost every element is understood in different ways and this is typified by the word *qualification*. The study has tried to develop consensus across countries about defining these elements. Significant progress has been achieved in developing common understanding of qualifications systems, qualifications frameworks and qualifications themselves.

For the benefit of the reader, and because these terms have been used extensively in this book, the following terms and concepts have been defined: competence, credit, lifelong learning, recognition of learning, formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning.

Policy recommendations on how to best use the three main tools policymakers could use

Policy making for lifelong learning in the arena of qualifications systems is difficult, underdeveloped and possibly undervalued. This book suggests that it is useful to review the role of qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning and discusses some of the practical issues for policy makers. From the wide ranging discussion of evidence generated by this study, it is clear that there are opportunities to use qualifications systems to develop lifelong learning. Three main tools can be identified that policy makers could use.

Review policy responses

The first tool is applied to existing policy responses to lifelong learning. The set of mechanisms can be used to discover whether the original logic underpinning the creation of each national policy response remains robust. For example, have the benefits they promised been delivered or are they still expected?

Systematic review of current policy responses to lifelong learning that involve qualifications systems is a good starting point. It is possible to use the mechanisms as ways to build new policy responses to lifelong learning that draw on the knowledge that each mechanism is defined as a means of influencing the behaviour of main stakeholders and therefore offers potential for optimisation of policy responses. Mechanisms are therefore valuable new tools for policy making.

Review powerful mechanisms

The second tool is more specific than the first and involves analysing policy responses to ensure they incorporate the powerful mechanisms identified in this book as incisive in making qualifications systems more responsive to the lifelong learning agenda. This tool involves the use of a specific set of mechanisms that appear to have a potentially greater influence on policy responses to lifelong learning than others, either in their wide applicability to policy responses or in their potential as “agents of change”. Recently, the importance of mechanisms such as the ones reported above to support specific reforms has been evident and countries could benefit from reviewing them in their own context. Some of the practical applications of these powerful mechanisms in policy responses to lifelong learning are also examined in this book.

Contextualise and analyse a combination of mechanisms

A third tool for policy makers arising from the study is the opportunity mechanisms offer to appreciate the interaction between different reforms in the country context. The country context matters a great deal when considering the usefulness of mechanisms and will make the deployment (or otherwise) of mechanisms unique to each country.

An issue that arises immediately is the complexity of interactions between mechanisms and how they can be used to support one another (and therefore the policy response) and how counterproductive interactions can be avoided. This issue is also examined through examples in this book.

Setting a research agenda for the future

Linking quantitative indicators describing national qualifications systems and lifelong learning variables has proven a difficult exercise and there is little quantitative evidence, even if some is interesting and encouraging. Many conditions would need to be met in addition to having appropriate variables available for the appropriate period of time. Therefore, there are lessons to be learned and the following represent key elements of a research agenda for the future:

- There is a need for sound conceptual work about the best way to define systemic variables and to produce appropriate indicators describing national qualifications systems.
- There is a need for research on the best way to relate national qualifications systems to lifelong learning through quantitative variables.
- There is a need for international data to be collected as an empirical counterpart for the conceptual work proposed above.
- There is a need for a stronger focus on micro relationships, at the level of the components and sub-components of qualifications systems.

In addition to specific data, trend data will also be necessary. It will take time and effort but it would allow for more appropriate reflection on the way national qualifications and lifelong learning systems evolve over time. This may require some stability in the way variables are measured. If national qualifications systems are to become a more commonly used context for policy responses, policy makers will have to be more thoroughly informed of current data as well as trend data to avoid fragmentation of policy making.

References

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