Key findings

| There is no magic bullet for increasing adults’ learning participation; approaches vary greatly across countries. | Comprehensive approaches covering different target groups and addressing multiple challenges faced by adults are used to increase the overall participation rate. |
| Stakeholder involvement is crucial in both the development and implementation of successful adult learning reforms. | Increasing adult learning participation does not have to come with a high price tag. The direct costs of successful measures ranged from 200 to 2 500 euros per participant. |
| Adapting policies and programmes based on lessons from implementation is common in successful reforms. | High participation is not sufficient for a well-functioning and future-ready adult learning system. Reforms must also focus on training quality and alignment with labour market needs, as well as achieving positive labour market outcomes for participants. |

Increasing adult learning participation is a key priority, but policies often stumble during implementation

Policy-makers have long recognised that participation in adult learning is key to unlock benefits of a changing world of work. Changes in skill demand brought about by megatrends such as technological change, globalisation and population ageing have put adult learning at the top of policy makers’ agendas. At present, only two-in-five adults across the EU and OECD participate in education and training in any given year, according to the OECD Survey of Adults Skills (PIAAC) and even fewer among low-skilled and older adults. While much has been written about the need for progress in this area, it is less clear how adult learning participation can be increased in practice. Many good ideas struggle to translate into real change on the ground, as they get stuck in the difficulties of policy implementation.

Drawing on the experience of six countries that have significantly increased participation over the past decades (see Chart 1), the OECD has looked at the factors behind successful policies and programmes.
The six countries – Austria, Estonia, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands and Singapore – have experienced some of the strongest increases in adult learning participation in the past 15 years. Based on analysis of 17 reforms deemed to be the most important for the observed increases in participation, the OECD has identified five key lessons on the design, implementation and evaluation of adult learning reforms.

There is no magic bullet for increasing adults’ participation in education or training

Selected reforms cover a wide variety of measures with diverse aims and objectives. They provide different types of training, address multiple barriers to participation and engage various target groups (see Table 1). The majority of the reforms are aimed at individuals by expanding their training options, or by improving incentives to participate in existing training programmes. Far fewer reforms are aimed at increasing training provision by employers. Most countries introduced both universal measures for the entire adult population and targeted ones, typically focusing on the low-skilled, unemployed or older individuals.

The number of participants reached by the policies under review varies widely from less than 2 000 in the early years of the Austrian Paid Educational Leave reform, to more than one million per year in the case of the Italian Training Funds. When comparing this to the adult population in the respective countries coverage varies from less than 1% of the adult population in most cases to more than 15% (Italian Training Funds). Hence, it is unlikely that any one reform was solely responsible for the observed country-level increases. This stresses the need for comprehensive approaches when tackling adult learning participation, because it may be the combination of reforms, rather than each reform in isolation, that contributes to the increase in country-level participation rates.

Stakeholder involvement is crucial in both the development and implementation of adult learning reforms.

While the impetus for reform often comes from the central administration, the involvement of a range of stakeholders in the development and/or the implementation of reform turns out to be essential. The lack of involvement of all relevant stakeholders hinders the effective implementation of policies.

Table 1. Overview of reforms included in the review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Reform</th>
<th>Short description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AUT</td>
<td>Expansion of ALMPs Initiative for Adult Education Paid Educational Leave</td>
<td>Increase in funding and scope of training-related Active Labour Market Policies New programme to provide free basic and second-chance education for adults Multi-stage reform of wage replacement benefit paid to individuals during training absences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EST</td>
<td>Expansion of ALMPs Lifelong-Learning Strategy State-Commissioned Short courses</td>
<td>Increase in funding and scope of training-related Active Labour Market Policies Comprehensive package of policy reforms, including in the area of adult learning New programme of free-of-charge short vocational courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUN</td>
<td>Free Second Vocational Degree Basic Skill Courses Open Learning Centres</td>
<td>Law change that made the acquisition of a second vocational degree free of charge New programme offering free-of-charge basic skills training for public workers Establishment of 50 learning centres offering free-of-charge short courses for low-skilled adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITA</td>
<td>Adult Education Centres Training Funds Network Training Training Vouchers Sector Plans</td>
<td>Reform of adult education centres, introducing greater autonomy and more tailored programmes Introduction of training levy paid by employers and used for in-company training New mandatory job-search training for older unemployed adults (50+) Introduction of training vouchers for older unemployed adults (50+) New sector-wide programmes to improve sectoral/regional labour markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLD</td>
<td>SkillsFuture Credit SkillsFuture Mid-Career Enhanced Subsidy SkillsFuture Series</td>
<td>Introduction of training vouchers for Singaporeans aged 25 and above Introduction of 90% training subsidy for Singaporeans aged 40+ New training programmes to address emerging skill needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The vast majority of successful reforms analysed are governed through a network approach, most often in the form of advisory or supervisory bodies that are composed of different key stakeholders. These most frequently include social partners and public employment services. Individual employers, learning providers and regional ministries are less frequently involved in the reforms under review. A coordinated approach requires reflection on the mechanisms applied to ensure the effectiveness of the decision-making process.

**Increasing adults’ participation in learning does not have to come with a high price tag**

The direct costs of the examined programmes ranged from 200 to 2 500 euros per participant (Chart 2). The most expensive programmes are those that also cover the indirect costs of training: the Austrian paid educational leave cost around 3 500 to 12 000 euros per person and year as it also compensated individuals for foregone wages.

Tax funding through social security contributions and levies is the most common way of paying for adult learning reforms often with co-funding by the European Union through the European Structural Funds (ESF). For some countries, the availability of ESF funding was instrumental in implementing reforms. However, while ESF funding facilitates the implementation of more wide-reaching reforms, it poses a risk for their sustainability beyond the ESF funding cycle. Estonia has established good practice by using ESF to trial new measures and then using tax or social security based funding when proven successful.

Funding was typically distributed through calls for proposals to public or private education providers who meet specific quality standards. In some cases funds were directly provided to individuals in the form of training vouchers, which allowed them to choose from the training options available in the market.

Adapting policies and programmes based on lessons from implementation is important for success.

Reforms are often altered along the way, compared with their initial design. Adaptations are often based on information generated through monitoring progress, evaluating results or bringing together providers of adult learning to share experiences. Adaptation mechanisms should be envisaged in the design of policies or programmes. Incorporating lessons learnt along the way provides an opportunity to overcome barriers to take-up, to identify bottlenecks and to improve the reform’s overall effectiveness. Cost-benefit analysis should be used early on to monitor cost-effectiveness and to adapt implementation accordingly.

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**Chart 2. Estimated yearly funding per participant (EUR)**

Note: Calculated as a simple average of minimum and maximum values when a range was provided in the report. The Austrian Paid Educational leave refers to the part-time version of the policy.
High participation rates are not sufficient for a well-functioning and future-ready adult learning system.

To achieve positive labour market outcomes for participants, policy-makers should not only focus on participation rates, but also on training quality, inclusion of disadvantaged groups and alignment with individual and labour market needs.

Quality is a multidimensional concept and difficult to measure. Minimum quality criteria and standards, as well as certification mechanisms can ensure that participants benefit from training in terms of societal or labour market outcomes. When providing education to adults, curricula as well as teaching methods should be adapted to their needs and preferences, which are very different from those of children. Programmes carefully designed for vulnerable groups such as migrants, elderly or low-skilled workers can help in tackling their specific barriers to participation. Taking into account updated results from skills assessment and anticipation exercises can help keep policies relevant, even in a context of changing skill needs.

References


Citation


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