Governments should do more to help adults retain, develop skills, says OECD

Governments must do more to ensure that people retain and develop skills acquired in early schooling through life-time education, the OECD recommends. According to a new study published jointly by the OECD and Statistics Canada, adults often lose skills learned early in life, with negative effects on earnings potential and on the prosperity of the community where they live.

Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey presents data drawn from surveys in Bermuda, Canada, Italy, the Mexican State of Nuevo León, Norway, Switzerland and the United States. The surveys measured adult skills in four domains: prose literacy (understanding continuous text such as found in books and newspaper articles), document literacy (understanding graphs, charts and other written information of a discontinuous nature), numeracy, including mathematical concepts, and problem-solving or analytical reasoning.

In the countries surveyed, Norway obtained the best results in three areas and Switzerland in one (numeracy). The latter came second in problem-solving, while Bermuda came second in prose comprehension and Canada came second in document comprehension. In all seven participating countries, the survey showed that people who use computers consistently scored higher on average on the prose literacy scale than those that don’t.

The surveys showed that parents’ levels of education had a significant impact on the literacy scores of their children, with young people aged 16 to 25 whose parents had low levels of education performing less well than their counterparts whose parents had higher educational attainments. Norway was the country where these differences were the least marked, while they were greatest in the United States.

Literacy and numeracy skills help to determine individuals’ opportunities in the jobs market, with high-skilled workers tending to work longer, enjoy better health, experience less unemployment and have significantly higher wages that lower skilled workers. People with good literacy and numeracy skills, in particular, tend to be better at using information and communication technologies (ICT). This in turn improves their ability to access higher-paid jobs.

At a broader macroeconomic level, higher literacy and numeracy skills help to improve employee productivity and reduce demands on health systems, both valuable outcomes at a time when many governments are struggling to finance the cost of providing health services to ageing populations. Reflecting these outcomes, the OECD urges policy makers to consider ways of increasing social and economic demand for skills, particularly at work, in order to give individuals an incentive for retaining existing skills and acquiring new ones. It also calls for more emphasis on adult education and training, as one of the keys to meeting rising skill demands that cannot be satisfied by the initial education system.

The full report can be downloaded at http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/44/7/34867438.pdf

For further information, journalists are invited to contact Patrick Werquin, OECD’s Directorate for Education (tel. 33 1 45 24 97 58 or patrick.werquin@oecd.org).

JT00184375