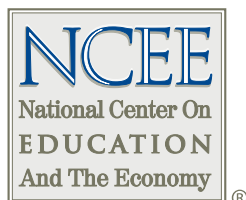




Background Paper for *One Step Forward* Initiative

International Trends in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning



Credits

This paper was researched and drafted by Gretchen Cheney and edited by Jackie Kraemer, Mary Clagett and Ray Uhalde of the Workforce Development Group (WDSG) at the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). It was developed as a background document for WDSG's *One Step Forward* Initiative funded by the Walmart Foundation.

As part of the *One Step Forward* Initiative, a policy paper, a guide for practitioners, administrators and policymakers, and a guide for employers were also produced for Adult Education for Work.

For more information or copies of those booklets, please contact NCEE at 202.379.1800.

One Step Forward Initiative

In Fall 2007, the WDSG at the National Center on Education and the Economy received a grant from the Walmart Foundation to identify a set of quality indicators for Adult Education for Work—programs geared to helping low-skilled workers acquire the basic skills they need to succeed in the 21st-century workplace and to enhance U.S. firms' competitiveness. The purpose of identifying the elements of Adult Education for Work programs is to:

- (1) Inform the adult education field and its practitioners about the key components of effective programs;
- (2) Stimulate excellence and guide quality improvement in programming in support of Adult Education for Work; and
- (3) Steer new public and private investments into expanded and transformed programming.

This paper on Adult Education for Work is one of the products produced by the *One Step Forward* Initiative.

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International Trends in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

This paper provides a review of key international initiatives focused on better connecting adult education to the workplace and improving the quality and quantity of adult education.

There has been much discussion about and promotion of the concept of lifelong learning over the last ten to fifteen years. While Adult Education has been part of this discussion, it has not been given as much prominence nor seen as much of an investment as elementary and secondary education, the transition years between school and work, or higher education. However, the tide seems to be turning as more and more countries are concluding that the adult population must have a higher level of skills in literacy, numeracy and language in order to succeed economically. It is in the context of an increasingly competitive global economy that countries are beginning to attend to issues of access and quality in Adult Education as a way of raising productivity and increasing competitiveness. In addition to global competition, a number of other factors have contributed to this trend:

- The International Adult Literacy Survey (followed by the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey) shed light on the fact that, even in the most advanced Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) countries, a large fraction of the adult population does not have the skill levels needed to function effectively in today's economy and society.
- The aging population means that a significant percentage of the workforce left the education and training system more than 20 years ago. With more

than one out of three workers in OECD countries over the age of 45, reskilling may be needed.¹

- The influx of immigrants has forced many countries to invest in an infrastructure of supports for those needing basic education and second language training.
- A persistently high rate of individuals leaving school early results in a significant portion of the workforce struggling to find success in the workplace without formal qualifications.

Given this context, countries have an interest in improving their labor force productivity in order to generate economic growth. It has been shown that a country able to attain literacy scores 1 percent higher than the international average will achieve levels of labor productivity and GDP per capita that are 2.5 and 1.5 percent higher, respectively than that of other countries.² And recent studies have shown that an equitable distribution of skills has a strong impact on overall economic performance.³ Many countries are creating specific policies to increase the participation of low-skilled adults in education and training services.

¹ Martin, John P. "Adult Learning at the OECD—Will Cinderella Get to the Ball?" Speech delivered to the International Conference on Adult Learning Policies. December 5–7, 2001. Seoul, Korea.

² Coulombe et al. "Literacy Scores, Human Capital and Growth Across Fourteen OECD Countries." Statistics Canada/Human Resources and Skills Development Council Canada. 2004.

³ Promoting Adult Learning (2005). OECD.

European countries, in particular, have attempted various experimental programs and efforts to encourage their low-skilled adults to pursue further education and training. Australia and New Zealand are also leaders in this area. In this paper, we present strategies and programs that these countries designed to improve the basic skills of adults and the quality of the services available. The purpose is to provide examples for the U.S. to consider and to urge the U.S. to move ahead on this agenda.

The U.S. Context

Thirty million Americans over the age of 16 do not have a high school credential, including a third of foreign-born adults and over 40 percent of Hispanics. Eleven OECD countries have higher percentages of 25- to 34-year-olds attaining at least a high school diploma. Every year more than a million U.S. high school students do not graduate with their class. These high school dropouts face long odds of landing a well-paying job and they earn less than their counterparts with diplomas. The Alliance for Excellent Education has estimated that the approximately 1.2 million students who should have graduated with the Class of 2007 will cost the nation nearly \$329 billion in lost income over the course of their lifetimes.

And while the United States continues to be a leader in attaining university degrees, the rate of attainment has grown by only two percent over three generations, which is less than one-fifth the rate of growth in the average OECD country. As a result, several countries now match the United States in this area, and the data indicate that other OECD countries' younger generations' rates of attainment are poised to surpass the U.S. rate.

Demographic shifts will only serve to compound the problem. According to a 2007 report, "America's Perfect Storm," a larger share of workers will have

minimal reading skills in 2030 than today.⁴ The combination of the baby boom retirement and a large wave of less-educated immigrants moving into the workforce will result in a downward shift in reading and math skills.

A number of national and state organizations in the U.S., including the National Governor's Association, have identified Level 3 proficiency on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) as a minimum standard for success in today's labor market. Findings from the IALS assessment indicate that only half of the U.S. adult population 16–65 years of age reached Level 3. The challenge is particularly severe for foreign-born adults who had an average composite literacy score of 210 (Level 1), giving the U.S. a 16th place ranking out of 17 high-income countries.

This data would suggest an increased demand for and interest in Adult Education services, particularly for second language learners and immigrants. However, only about 2.7 million individuals participate in Adult Education. (This includes adult basic education, adult secondary programs, and English as a second language [ESL] services.) With an estimated 23 million adults in the U.S. lacking English proficiency⁵, ESOL is the fastest growing part of Adult Education. Even so, less than 5 percent of the population is accessing needed services.

There is, not surprisingly, substantial variation in Adult Education and training participation rates among the U.S.'s international competitors. Still, the U.S. is far behind the leaders. According to Eurostat, the leaders—Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland and the United Kingdom—report education and training participation rates ranging from 26 to 32 percent of the population aged 25 to 64.⁶

⁴ "America's Perfect Storm," ETS, 2007.

⁵ US Census Bureau, 2005.

⁶ "Key Figures on Europe (2007–08 edition)." Eurostat.

Challenges

There are a number of reasons why adult basic education and language training programs serve only a tiny fraction of those who need help. It is well known that adults, many of whom are working, find it very difficult to enroll in education programs, especially for any substantial length of time. Adults face work, family, funding, and logistical challenges. Postsecondary student-aid policies are skewed toward traditional students. There is no system in place that might encourage employers to invest more in the skills of their less prepared workers. Another important issue is that instruction may not be of high quality nor particularly engaging or motivating.

Subsequently, the vast majority of those who do enroll do not stay long enough to acquire a credential, much less find their way into a postsecondary education program that could serve as a gateway to a well-paying career. In fact, the workplace-basic skills learning connection is extremely tenuous. Very few programs combine language and literacy services with job training as a way of increasing student interest and motivation, accelerating progress, increasing program retention, and ultimately leading to higher earnings for participants.

The Policy Environment

The policies, funding, and implementation of Adult Education are extremely decentralized in the United States. While two-thirds of the states (62 percent in 2004) administer Adult Education through their Departments of Education, others choose to tie Adult Education to agencies overseeing employment, workforce development, and higher education, reflecting the importance of Adult Education for employment and access to postsecondary education.

The federal Office of Adult and Vocational Education makes grants to states. A total of \$564 million in federal funds are dispensed through this program. Along with this, according to the Working Poor Families Project, “states invest three dollars of their own for every federal dollar,” which translates to approximately \$2 billion in combined state and federal expenditures on Adult Education. This represents a miniscule percentage (0.3%) of the total education budget at federal and state levels for 2004–05, which was estimated at \$536 billion according to the Department of Education. Even when other federal resources, such as Even Start, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, WIA Title I, and Trade Adjustment Assistance are added in, many adult learners do not have access to these resources and have no choice but to pay on their own, or rely on employers for tuition.

The International Experience

The U.S. legislative context is similar to that of other countries, the majority of which have no single piece of legislation providing a framework for Adult Education and no single ministry with full responsibility. Without such a framework, Adult Education finds itself with little political support and vulnerable to financial cutbacks. However, in Europe, there is a recent effort to coordinate and integrate policies, structures, and financing.⁷

Many countries have begun to release white papers or other strategy documents which recognize the importance of Adult Education and building of certain foundation skills to strengthen economic and social development. For instance, New Zealand’s Tertiary Education Strategy 2002–07 identifies a strategy to “raise foundation skills so that all people can participate in our knowledge society.” In 2007, the

⁷ “Non-Vocational Adult Education in Europe. Executive Summary of National Information on Eurybase: Working Document.” (January 2007). European Commission.

European Commission adopted a communication calling on the member states to promote adult learning in Europe. “The pressures of demographic change, globalization and the emergence of newly industrialized and highly competitive countries mean that adult learning must be placed firmly on the political agenda.”⁸ To support this, the Commission committed to launching an Action Plan on Adult Learning to minimize the barriers to participation; ensure the quality of adult learning; recognize and validate learning outcomes; invest in the aging population and migrants; and measure progress with appropriate indicators and benchmarks.

Emerging Approaches and Strategies

While the strategy papers tend to make similar arguments about the importance of Adult Education, the approaches adopted by different countries to improve the quantity and quality of adult learning experiences have varied. The most popular approaches can be categorized into the following areas:

1. Creating standards for adult learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy
2. Creating certifications to improve the transparency and portability of skills and knowledge
3. Developing financial incentives to encourage low-skilled workers to enroll in education
4. Encouraging employer involvement and workplace connections
5. Developing quality assurance measures for providers

Each of these is explained in more detail below, with examples and lessons learned from different countries.

1. Learning Standards

Issue

One major challenge for the United States is the lack of national standards for the academic and work readiness skills adults need to succeed in further education and in the workplace. Some states set their own standards and there are a few national efforts as well. For example, Equipped for the Future (EFF) has developed voluntary content standards for adult learning, and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has created voluntary national standards for teachers. However, we do not have a national consensus on what constitutes basic levels of literacy, numeracy and workplace competencies.

International Models

Seven million people in the United Kingdom have poor literacy and numeracy skills, including around half a million or more who struggle with English because it is not their first language. **Skills for Life** sets out a strategy for improving the skills of those groups with the greatest literacy and numeracy needs. To do this, the government committed to creating robust national standards, a national core curriculum, teaching materials, and new national literacy and numeracy tests through the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

This effort to develop an awareness and understanding of the national certificates coupled with increased employer demand and an improved delivery system has resulted in more than 1,619,000 adults achieving a Skills for Life qualification since 2001. The country is in line to meet the government target of a 40 percent reduction of adults in the workforce without a Level 2 qualification. The Level 2 qualification is equivalent to what students need to enter further education by 2010.

⁸ “Adult Learning: It is Never Too Late to Learn.” <http://www.eaea.org/index.php?k=12321>

In May 2001, New Zealand released *More Than Words: A Strategy for Adult Literacy*. One year later, the **draft Adult Literacy Quality Mark (dALQM)** was developed by a group of literacy specialists and quality assurance representatives. The goal was to establish a nationally consistent literacy quality standard to be applied across a range of learning contexts and learning groups. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority did a pilot of the dALQM in 2003.

The findings from this pilot suggested that there were still a number of steps and investments to make in order to ready the sector for a quality literacy provision. These included developing the capacity of the providers, integrating the dALQM processes with the standard quality assurance processes, and an ongoing review and evaluation of the final quality standard. New Zealand is doing this work now.

Both the United Kingdom and the New Zealand standards discussed above are limited to literacy and/or numeracy and do not explicitly address applied learning or work readiness types of skills. However, these issues are addressed in other examples later in this paper.

2. Certifications

Issue

The benefits of adult learning are not always clear and it is believed that many adults will not participate unless there is a way to capture their learning progress in a format that is recognizable and understood in the labor market. In response to this challenge, some countries have devised certifications to strengthen recognition and transparency of acquired skills. Also incorporated in this issue is the need to stimulate demand by employers and colleges for such certifications. It is not enough to create certificates if they are not viewed as valuable qualifications by the business and postsecondary communities.

International Models

New Zealand developed the **National Certificate of Employment Skills (NCES)** as a standards-based recognition of competence in literacy, oracy, numeracy, and other workplace skills including teamwork, problem solving, safety, computing, and self-management. This qualification was developed in acknowledgement of the fact that a wide range of employers recognize these skills as being important for the workplace. It is designed to be flexible so that people can demonstrate the skills and knowledge specified without necessarily participating in a program of learning. It is a Level 1 qualification (out of 8 levels offered within the National Qualifications Framework or NQF). It was first registered on the NQF in 1996.

Most work toward the NCES is done through a training provider, such as a polytechnic, private training establishment or other accredited school. To earn the NCES, learners need to earn the required number of credits on the National Qualifications Framework, which is based on national standards. The NCES encompasses 22 credits which are organized in the areas of problem solving, employment-related knowledge, communication, health and safety, and mathematics. The standards are mostly assessed by collecting information from observational checklists and from work sheets completed during students' course work.

Once learners have been assessed, they are registered as learners with the Qualifications Authority and every year in which they gain credits or qualifications, they receive a listing of all their results in their Record of Achievement. This Record of Achievement demonstrates to employers what they have achieved.

3. Financial Incentives Targeted at Low-Skilled Populations

Issue

Considering that many employers prefer to invest in training for the more highly-educated workers, governments often offer co-financing and provide economic incentives for low-skilled and disadvantaged groups. Individual learning accounts (ILAs) and vouchers have shown some evidence of being able to target government resources effectively and stimulate competition among training providers.

International Models

The initial concept behind **individual learning accounts** was that funds would be set aside and saved over the long-term for education and training purposes. The state supports this savings plan by either reducing the tax burdens or increasing the interest earned. Only Austria is currently trying this approach nationally. Austria's program has not been particularly successful in reaching low-skilled and at-risk groups, however.

The United Kingdom took a different approach in its ILA which is more like a training voucher. Every citizen over age 19 who opened a Learning Account at a bank with a deposit of at least 25 pounds received a government grant of 150 pounds. This money was available to finance training with a registered training provider to improve vocational skills. Participants also received reductions on course fees for standard courses (20%) and courses on communication, numeracy and basic computer skills (80%). The money had to be used quickly; it expired after one year.

The UK program was introduced in September 2000 and to date is the biggest of its kind implemented.

It resulted in a total of 2.6 million accounts opened (although only 1.4 million accounts were actually activated and used).⁹ And although it was designed to reach the entire population, unskilled and educationally disadvantaged groups participated at relatively high levels. Twenty-two percent who opened an account had not requested further training in the past 12 months, 56 percent of users could not otherwise finance the training, and 16 percent had no vocational qualification.¹⁰

The program, however, was short-lived. The British model did not require accreditation of the training providers for participation in the ILA program. It ended after 14 months with allegations of shoddy quality and in some cases outright fraud by some of the training providers.

Other ILA programs have been started in Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands. And Britain has not abandoned the concept of ILAs despite the faulty design of the first effort. In 2006 the British government submitted a white paper which outlines the importance of increasing the qualification levels of a certain segment of the population. The new **Skills Account Model** ensures that everyone can acquire Level 2 qualifications¹¹ and basic reading, writing and numeracy skills free of charge. A pilot program is planned.

⁹ Dohmen, Dieter (2008). "Individual Learning Accounts in Europe—an Overview." Paper presented at the Cedefop seminar on Individual Learning Accounts in Thessaloniki/Greece.

¹⁰ McLaughlin, Daniel (2007). "Individual Learning Accounts—Lesson Learned: England." Paper presented at the Regional Offices of Administration, Florence (Tuscany, Italy).

¹¹ Level 2 generally corresponds with the educational level attained at age 16 in Great Britain (the end of the 11 class).

4. Employer Involvement and Workplace Connections

Issue

There is general agreement that the business community must play a role in encouraging workers to obtain a minimum standard of skills. Employers, who stand to directly benefit from increased productivity levels, need to prod and support workers to invest in their basic skill sets. This message is more pressing now that employers are facing an aging workforce coupled with increased skill requirements.

Businesses are quickly finding that their new or replacement hires require higher qualifications to perform “the same job”, which is motivating their involvement in adult learning.

The next step after demanding higher skill levels is finding ways to strengthen the connection between learning and work as a way of motivating and rewarding worker investments.

International Models

On the business side, the United Kingdom is encouraging as many employers as possible to make a firm commitment to positive action to address literacy and numeracy skills needs. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC), a non-governmental agency, is responsible for planning and funding high-quality education and training for everyone outside of the university structure in England. The LSC’s goals are to increase participation, raise adult demand for training, increase skill levels for national competitiveness, and improve access to and quality of training. It helps employers identify literacy and numeracy skills needs among their staff and provides advice on appropriate skills training opportunities in the local area.

For instance, the **Train to Gain** service acts a “broker” by strengthening local links between colleges and companies wishing to purchase training for their employees. With Train to Gain, a local skills broker assesses individual business needs at no cost. After a full skills audit, the skills broker suggests relevant training options and pinpoints any funding available. The advice offered is tailored to the needs of the sector, and training may be conducted on-site to minimize disruption. Through Train to Gain, employees can access a wide range of qualifications and training courses. According to a November 2007 press release, Train to Gain has helped more than 52,000 employers and enabled over 240,000 employees to undertake training since its launch in 2006. This success resulted in the government doubling the program’s funding.

New Zealand’s work in foundation learning is focused increasingly on the workplace. **Upskilling the Workforce** supports initiatives with Industry Training Organizations to integrate literacy, numeracy and language in industry-related training programs. A major focus of the project is building a link between literacy, numeracy and language training for low-skilled adults and increased productivity in the workplace. If employers can improve the literacy, numeracy and language skills of their employees they can make better use of skills and therefore lift productivity, profitability, and pay.¹²

This project also develops the capability and quality of tutors and training providers to better meet the needs of employers. An initial focus is on supporting tutors and practitioners to develop their teaching skills in workplace contexts.

¹² Benseman, John and Alison Sutton. OECD/CERI Formative Assessment Project. Background Report: New Zealand.

5. Quality Assurance Indicators

Issue

Increasing demand for and access to adult learning opportunities is not sufficient. There must also be a focus on improving delivery and quality control within programs. Some of this is simply about improving efficiency so that resources are targeted to specific adult needs as appropriate (i.e., second language learners). Many providers also recognize that time is a key constraint to participation and are devising flexible arrangements in response. Workplace-based programs can contribute to improved participation rates.

Quality control requires defining appropriate performance indicators and assessment methods. These indicators go beyond program outcomes. While it is important to measure the results of adult learning, quality assurance efforts typically review the overall design of the program, the resources used, the quality of the staff, how learners access the program, actual delivery of services, and more.

International Models

New Zealand has invested in quality assurance in the area of foundation skills training. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority began implementing the **Foundation Learning Quality Assurance (FLQA)** requirements in the beginning of 2007. The FLQA requirements expand on established quality assurance processes and standards and are specific to foundation learning programs. Foundation learning programs are those with an identifiable focus on literacy, numeracy or language. The requirements cover practices in six areas: 1) planning and delivery; 2) resources; 3) staff; 4) learner access and entry; 5) delivery; and 6) review and development.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority published a self-review guide to explain each of the six practices in depth, make connections to research references, and provide examples of good quality. These requirements apply to foundation learning programs delivered by institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), private training establishments, government training establishments, and some adult and community education providers.

New Zealand has also launched an effort to professionalize the skills of tutors and to build a teaching culture that is centered on learners' needs. A competency standards-based national **Adult Literacy Educator Qualification** was introduced in 2006 at a level equivalent to the first year of a degree course. This qualification is aimed at those who will tutor in national adult literacy and numeracy qualifications at certificate and diploma levels. A postgraduate program offering a Masters in Adult Literacy and Numeracy Education was initiated in 2007.

In Ireland, the Qualifications Act 1999 requires that all providers of further education and training programs establish quality assurance procedures. As a result of this legislation, the government created the **Evolving Quality Framework (EQF)** to guide and improve the quality of service in Adult Basic Education (ABE) in Ireland. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) trains facilitators who work with a team at each ABE site (most often Vocational Education Committees, or VECs, through local schools and colleges) to self-evaluate their services in detail using the Quality Framework. There are five Quality Areas, each of which has standards within it: 1) resources; 2) management; 3) teaching and learning; 4) progression; and 5) outreach and promotion.

In each year since 2004, the government has provided grants to ABE providers to help them implement the Framework. The money is mainly used to pay evaluation team members and the cost of the NALA-trained EQF facilitator. In 2004 an independent evaluation found that the EQF is a useful resource in the quality assurance of adult basic education in Ireland. While it is not a national reporting system, it does allow local evaluation teams to analyze program strengths and weaknesses in a structured way. The goal is to elicit meaningful indicators of quality that eventually could be used for national reporting requirements.¹³

Implications for *One Step Forward*

The purpose of NCEE's *One Step Forward* Initiative, funded by a grant from the Wal-Mart Foundation, is to create a set of quality indicators for Adult Education for Work programs. The intent is to help: (1) inform the Adult Education and work readiness field and its practitioners about the key components of effective programs; (2) guide quality improvement in this area; and (3) steer new public and private investments in expanded and transformed quality programming. These goals align with broader trends seen in Europe and other countries that are designed to improve the quality and accessibility of Adult Education services. The international experiences described above can provide examples of strategies that could be applied to this work as well as broader efforts to expand Adult Education services nationally and tie them more closely with the workforce and economic needs of regions and of the nation.

¹³ National Adult Literacy Agency website: <http://www.nala.ie>

