

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARIES

ADULT EDUCATION IN NORTH AMERICA: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

SUMMARY BY T. SCOTT MURRAY

What is this study about?

This paper, by Albert Tuijnman and Emmanuel Boudard of the Institute of International Education at Stockholm University in Sweden, presents 15 indicators of participation in adult education as part of their analysis of the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) for 20 countries. These indicators allow readers to compare the functioning of training markets in North America with those in other advanced countries. This document has three main chapters supplemented by five appendices and an opening “Summary and Highlights”.

In their first chapter, “Introduction and Overview” the authors explain that their analysis is based on the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), an initiative conducted between 1994 and 1998. They note the essential elements of the IALS by describing the timing of the IALS data collection, the design of the survey, the process and the research team. The purposes of the survey were to find out how well adults used printed information to function in society; to collect data on the incidence and volume of participation in adult education and training; and to investigate the relationships between initial and adult education on the one hand and literacy proficiency and wider economic and social outcomes on the other. The focus of this monograph, the authors explain, is on the adult education data set produced by IALS in order to make the results of the data collection available to a wide audience.

Chapter 2 presents 15 indicators that can be used for assessing aspects of participation in adult education in North America against the backdrop of the training efforts expended by other nations, the majority of them economically advanced Member countries of the OECD. Chapter three presents the authors conclusions and considerations for policy analysis and further research.

What are the questions addressed by the study?

The study's fifteen indicators shape the issues that this study examines and the framework upon which the study's findings are based. The indicators examine:

- 1) The rate of participation in all adult education and training activities
- 2) The mean number of hours spent on adult education and training activities
- 3) The relationship between initial educational attainment and adult education participation across countries.
- 4) Women's share of adult education provision
- 5) The rate of adult education and training for older workers
- 6) The rate of adult education for the unemployed compared to the employed
- 7) Access to training for blue- and white-collar workers
- 8) Stakeholder support for adult education
- 9) Training, literacy skills and engagement at work (for example, comparing those with a high level of literacy proficiency versus to those with a low literacy)
- 10) Training hours and firm size (that is willingness of firms of various sizes to invest)
- 11) Unfulfilled educational aspirations (those wanting training but who do not enroll)
- 12) Barriers to participation (lack of time, money, motivation, etc.)
- 13) Wage earners and adult education (participation by wage level)
- 14) Determinants of adult education (use of literacy skills, level of education, etc.)
- 15) Adult education and a nations' social capital (participation in community activities and the voluntary sector, the notion of "trust in others").

Why is this study important?

This study uses IALS information gathered from 20 countries to explore the factors that shape a country's capacity and willingness to provide literacy and skills development training to adults aged 16 to 65. It applies this intelligence to the adult education situation in Canada and the United States providing lessons about what needs to be done to ensure that all adults have access to the training that they require to function effectively in modern societies and economies. The study also points to the kinds of research that still needs to be done to provide the information required by policymakers and educators for future policy and practice.

What does the study conclude?

The principal finding is that adults in both Canada and the United States had become increasingly involved in formal education and training by the mid 1990's. The participation rate (percentage of the population aged 25 to 64) for Canada was 35% and for the United States 39%, both close to the 20-country average of 34%. There were significant differences in the volume of this training in the two countries with Canada's mean number of hours per capita being 74.3 compared to the U.S rate of 56.

They also found that non-participants in adult education and training far outnumbered those involved in such training in both Canada and the United States revealing a paradox. While both of these countries recognize the importance of education and training in knowledge-based and technologically driven economies, the majority of their working aged adults either do not have the resources required for or are not willing to become involved in such studies.

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The authors point to some of the implications of this situation. For example their analysis raises questions about the adequacy of current levels of investment in adult education and training in North America flagging concerns about the need for public investments to increase participation rates. Further, the data presented in this report identify levels of inequity in the social distribution of participation rates. They found that adult education and training rates for persons with low levels of educational attainment and for older adults, for example, were significantly lower in North America when compared to a number of other countries.

Enlarging the participation rates of these groups is economically and socially desirable, and an argument for public support for workplace based education and training. This will be particularly problematic, they concluded, because employers in North America fund much more of adult education and training than in the other countries studied. Employers tend to invest in those employees who are most likely to repay that investment by being more highly productive. Given this general practice in Canada and the U.S. public policy would have to create targeted incentives for firms to train more of their least able employees while providing encouragement to those workers to actively seek training.

The authors add that public policy interventions need not be restricted to offering financial incentives. For example, governments could collect and disseminate information on the social and financial returns that result from training. Further, the authors argue that there is scope for public policymakers to assist the unemployed, immigrants and persons who are outside the paid labour force.

Given that this study was based on IALS alone Tuijnman and Boudard call for further work over a longer time frame to properly monitor adult life-long learning behaviours and the impact of changes in the nature of both social and economic activity. In addition to work on formal adult education and training they also suggest further study into non-formal and informal means.

They also point to important gaps in our knowledge base about adult education. A major concern they say is the relationship between different learning patterns and the acquisition of various key skills and competencies. Another concern is the relationship between acquired skills and the social, economic and labour market outcomes of individuals and firms.

The authors also pose questions about skill loss suggesting that this issue be given closer attention because, as they note, research suggests that processes of skill loss play an important role in reducing the stock of skills available to labor markets. They comment that little is known about the mechanisms associated with these losses and how participation in formal learning might prevent them.

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Tuijnman and Boudard conclude that these issues can be properly addressed only with the use of a micro data set containing reliable information on variables at both the individual and firm level. At a minimum, they suggest, these variable should include socio-demographic measures; information on formal educational attainment and subsequent adult learning in both formal and informal settings at work and in daily life; assessed proficiency in several key skill domains; and social and economic outcomes for individuals and firms.

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