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Cross-national patterns of participation in adult education and policy trends in Korea, Norway, and Vietnam

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Abstract Using comparative data, this article examines the level and distribution of participation in adult education (AE) opportunities among countries that participated in PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies). It considers observed cross-country patterns in relation to some mechanisms that drive unequal chances to participate and to some policy issues that surround the provision, governance, and financing of different types of adult learning. It also explores recent policy developments relevant to AE in three selected countries (Korea, Norway, and Vietnam).

Keywords Adult education · Adult learning · Lifelong learning · Literacy · PIAAC

Our intent in this article is to present cross-national patterns of participation in organized forms of adult education (AE) for a range of selected countries with reasonably comparative data. We consider these patterns in relation to some of the mechanisms that drive unequal chances to participate and in relation to policy issues that surround the provision, governance, and financing of different types of AE. Out of the countries included, 22 participated in PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies), which is primarily composed of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. Two other countries are included for which there are reasonable comparable data but who are non-OECD and did not participate in PIAAC—namely, Brazil and Vietnam. We present recent policy developments relevant to AE in Korea and Norway, as well as Vietnam, to provide an overview of AE policy–related trends and issues in OECD as well as in non-OECD contexts.

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Definition of participation and the PIAAC dataset

We define "participation in AE" as whether adults aged 16–65 took part in some type of organized AE in the 12 months preceding the interview. AE activities include adult participation in nonformal education (NFE) activities as follows: open or distance education; on-the-job training or training by supervisors or coworkers; seminars or workshops; and courses or private lessons not otherwise reported. It also includes participation in formal education (FE) activities undertaken by nontraditional students. We define "nontraditional students" as adults who are in formal education but are not deemed to be in their initial cycle of studies. Thus, nontraditional students includes adults aged 16–65 undertaking second-chance education to attain lower secondary (ISCED 2) or below; adults 20–65 seeking to attain upper secondary (ISCED 3) or below; and adults aged 25–65 who participated in post-secondary education (ISCED 4 or higher).

PIAAC (also known as the Survey of Adult Skills) collected data in 2012 in a comparative manner across several OECD countries. (See OECD [2013] for a detailed description of PIAAC, the methodology used, and results.) In brief, PIAAC is a large-scale cooperative effort undertaken by governments, national statistics agencies, research institutions, and multilateral agencies. This international comparative assessment of key information-processing skills also collected people's comparable background information, such as sociodemographic factors and participation in AE. For each country that participated, PIACC drew large-scale representative samples of adults aged 16 to 65 and conducted face-to-face interviews. All empirical estimates we present in Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8, and in Table 1 (unless otherwise noted) are our own calculations based on the 2013 PIAAC database. We weighted all estimates.

Level of participation

In the results shown in Figure 1 (below), we distinguish between the proportion of adults who participated in FE, NFE, or both. We also distinguish between adults who participated for job-related and non-job-related reasons. Furthermore, in Table 1 (below), we sorted participation rates into six groups and presented them in relation to GDP per capita and the percentage of adult populations scoring at level 3 or higher on the PIAAC literacy scale. Adults scoring at level 3 or higher show high proficiency in reading vocabulary, sentence comprehension, and, not least, basic passage comprehension, all of which enable them to choose between a correct and an incorrect response on the basis of written text.

We derived the data for Brazil and Vietnam from different data sources that are not strictly comparable to PIAAC data. However, we believe these data provide a reasonable picture of the relative difference in participation in AE across the countries. Data for Brazil are available from a survey that two NGOs carried out, which found that, in 2007, 16% of adults aged 15 to 65 had taken an NFE course in the last 12 months. The results confirm an earlier survey from 2001, so this would probably place Brazil in the lowest participation band (of under 20%). The data for Vietnam, from the World Bank Skills Toward Employability and Productivity (STEP) study, reveal a 5% participation rate; however, nationally available statistics can be used to estimate a rate closer to 15% (discussed below), thus placing the estimate between 5% and 15%. We include data for Brazil and Vietnam in order to generate a broader understanding of AE policy trends and outcomes—one that extends beyond the contexts of OECD, Europe, and North America.

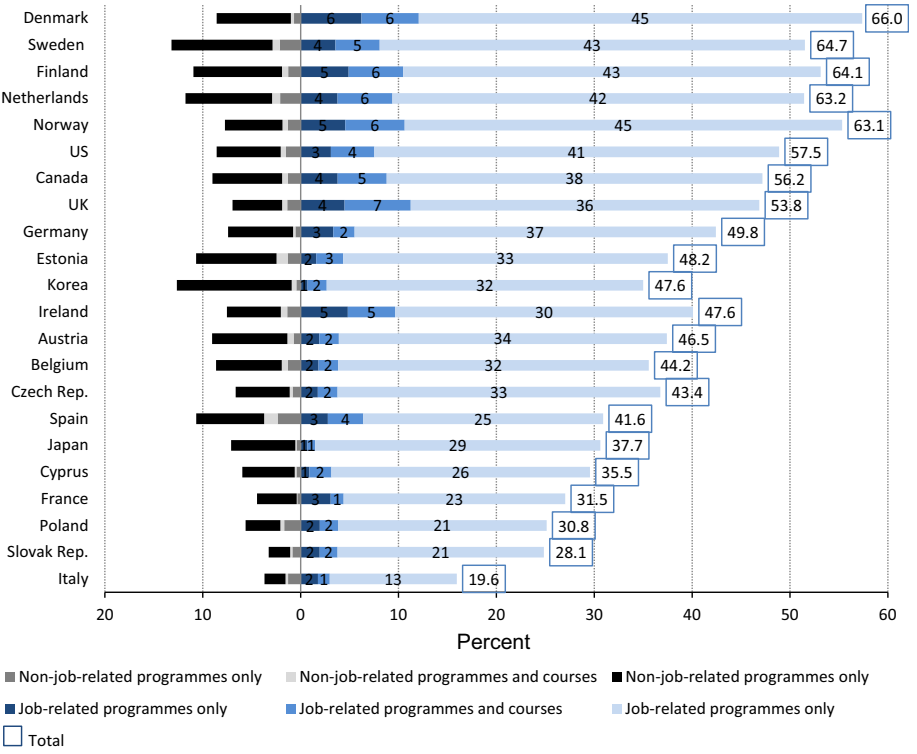

Fig. 1 Percentage of adults aged 16–65 who participated in AE

Three key observations can be discerned from Figure 1, as follows.

First, participation in AE varies substantially across countries. Differences are notable even among countries with similar economies and levels of development. More prosperous countries—as measured by per-capita GDP—tend to display higher participation rates in AE (Table 1). However, the relationship is not uniform. In particular, Nordic countries have higher participation than other countries with similar levels of per-capita GDP, such as Canada, the USA, and Germany, suggesting that policy and institutions matter. Data on the extent of adult populations scoring at level 3 or higher on the PIAAC literacy scale reveal a similar pattern.

Second, participation in FE, while far lower than in NFE, is much higher in some countries than others. This reveals the relative degree of openness of FE institutions to nontraditional students. It also provides an indication of how well developed AE is regarding its linkages to recognized qualifications. Indeed, in recent years some countries have made extensive progress in linking comprehensive qualification frameworks or FE to adult education that may have otherwise been considered as NFE. Denmark, Finland, Norway, and the UK have the highest proportion of adults participating in FE. The UK has, over the last decade, made substantial efforts to make FE more flexible and accessible for nontraditional students. In the early 2000s, the previously named UK Department for Education and Skills sought to develop an advanced qualifications framework to make it easier to link and provide recognition for separate and seemingly discontiguous modules

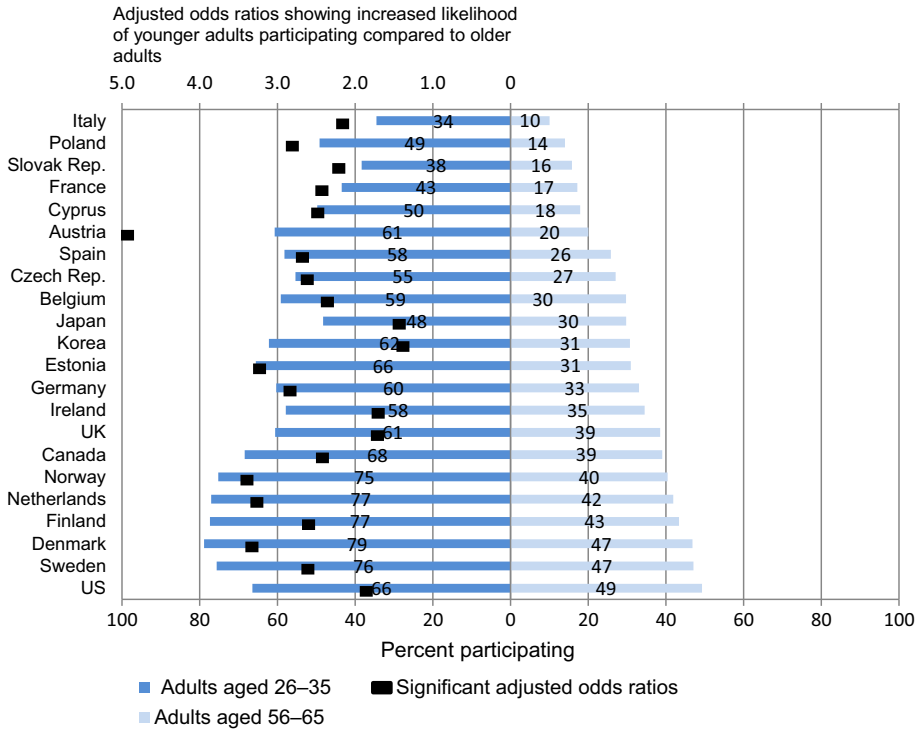

Fig. 2 Percentage of younger and older adults who participated in AE, and adjusted odds ratio showing the increased likelihood of younger adults to participate than older adults

within a coherent framework. With advanced AE systems, as reflected by consistently high rates of participation in AE, the Nordic countries also reveal high participation in FE.

Third, the dominant reason for participation is job-related; but non-job-related reasons play an important role, too. It is difficult to neatly distinguish the precise reasons why people engage in AE (Rubenson 1999). Many adults report personal reasons even if the activity is clearly relevant to working life; accordingly, both sets of reasons are relevant and policymakers should carefully consider them both, even when dealing with skills for the labour market. The data reveal that Sweden, the Netherlands, and Finland have some of the most developed provision for AE of both types. Korea, Estonia, and Spain also have highly developed provision for non-job-related reasons, but overall participation is lower in those countries because provision for job-related reasons is not as developed.

Distribution of participation

Participation in AE is unevenly distributed within all country populations. Figures 2, 3, 4, 5 present selected results in relation to age, the extent of education already attained, the level of literacy proficiency attained, and adults' socioeconomic background as reflected by their parents' level of education (also shown in Figure 6 for Vietnam). For Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, we adjusted odds ratios for the variables: age, gender, parents' education, education,

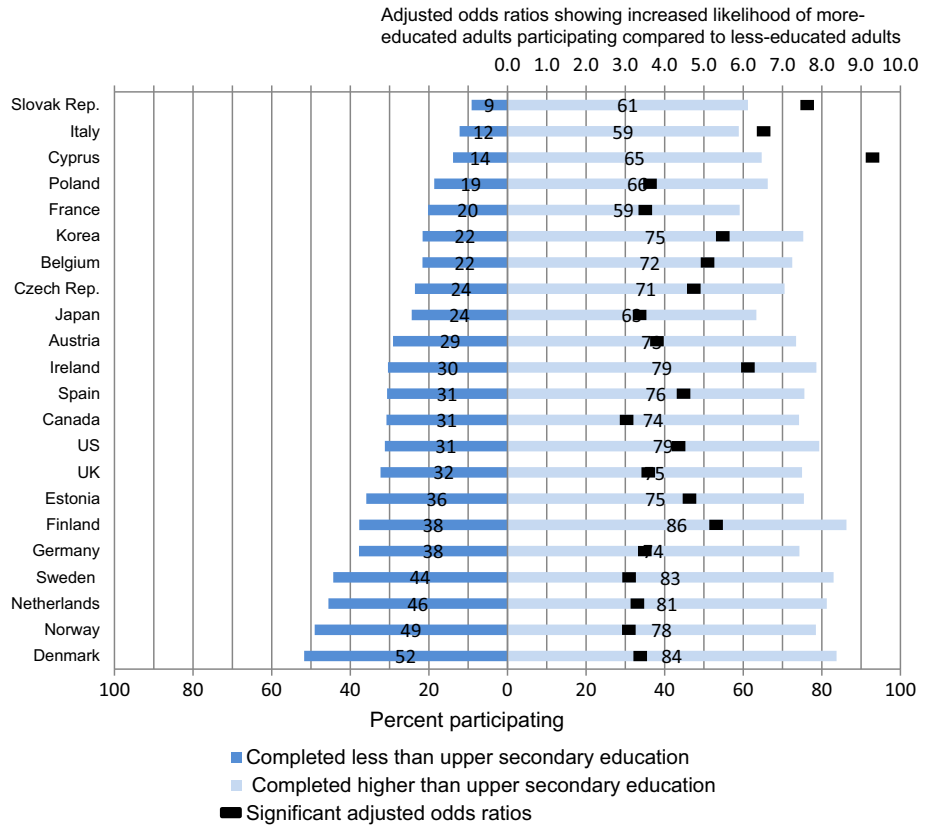

Fig. 3 Percentage of lower- and higher-educated adults who participated in AE, and adjusted odds ratio showing the increased likelihood of more-educated adults participating than less-educated adults

functional literacy, and immigration status. We calculated statistical significance on the basis of design-based standard errors.

The data in Figure 2 confirm a systematic pattern observed in prior research; namely, that older adults participate in AE at much lower rates. Differences, however, vary sharply across countries. For example, younger adults in Austria, Italy, and Poland are at least three times more likely to participate in AE than older adults. In Vietnam, the difference is over ten times (Figure 6). In contrast, the Nordic countries, the USA, and the Netherlands are much more effective at extending AE opportunities to older adults. Results for the latter are a reflection of more diversified provision, which can cater to the needs and aspirations of older adults. Observed differences hold even after adjusting for background variables, with younger adults more than twice as likely to participate as older adults in 17 out of the 22 countries.

Figure 3 contrasts rates of participation in AE for adults with low and high levels of education. Adults with high levels of initial education in the Slovak Republic are over six times more likely to participate in AE than adults with low levels. In Vietnam, the difference is nearly four times (Figure 6). Inequality in participation is present in all countries, but results show that some countries are more successful at extending AE to those

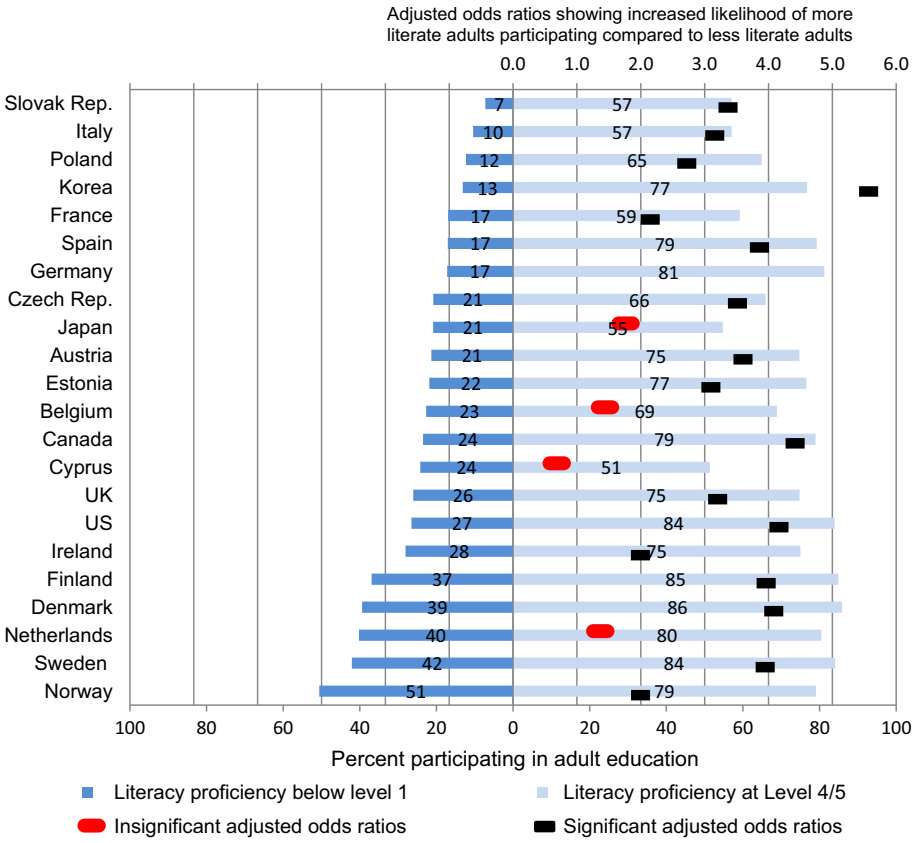

Fig. 4 Percentage of adults with low and high levels of literacy proficiency who participated in AE, and adjusted odds ratio showing the increased likelihood of more-proficient adults to participate than less-proficient adults

who initially had low levels of education. This is particularly the case among the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and Germany. Adjusted results suggest that more-educated adults have about three to five times higher odds of participating than less-educated adults. In a few countries, such as Italy and the Slovak Republic, the odds are even higher.

Figure 4 contrasts rates of participation in AE between adults who display very low levels of literacy proficiency (below level 1) and those who display the highest levels (levels 4 and 5). The patterns confirm the complementary nature of much AE in high-income countries. Overall, adults who have already attained higher levels of both education and literacy proficiency are more likely to participate than those who have not. The Nordic countries and the Netherlands appear to be the most successful in ensuring that adults with low literacy take up AE. In Norway, 51% of adults with the lowest levels of literacy proficiency participated in some form of AE in the 12 months preceding the survey. In contrast, in other countries, the most literate have up to four to five times higher odds of participating than adults with the lowest levels of literacy. In 18 out of the 22 countries, the higher probability of more-literate adults participating in AE remains even after adjusting for a range of background variables.

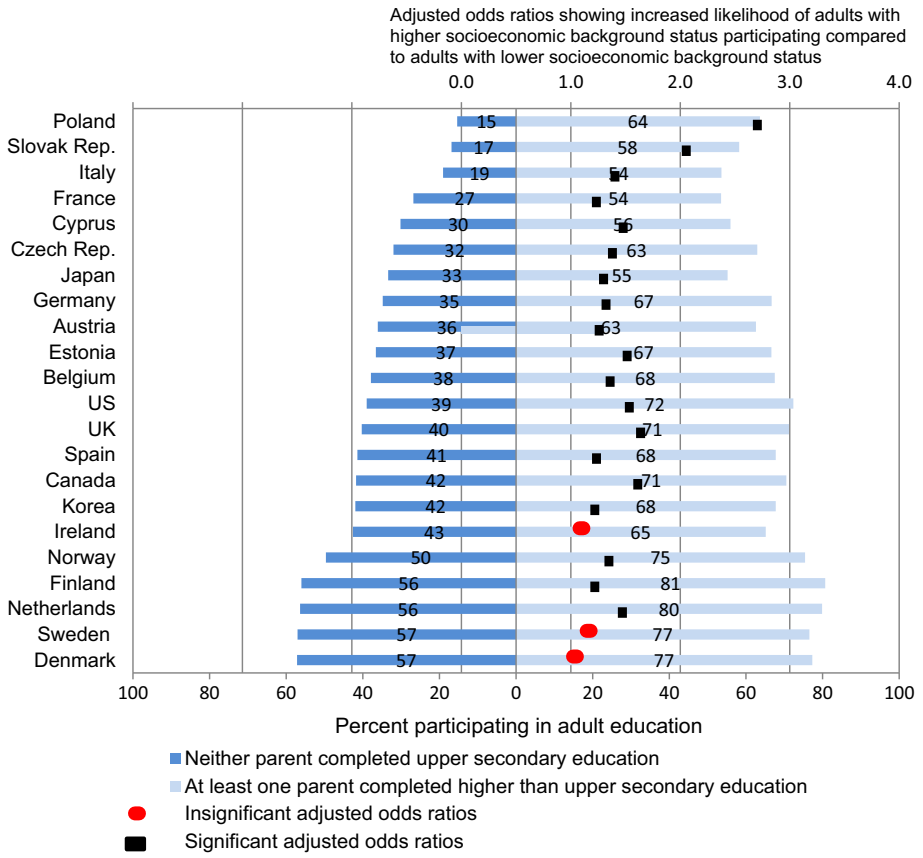

Fig. 5 Percentage of adults with low and high levels of socioeconomic background who participated in AE, and adjusted odds ratio showing the increased likelihood of higher-status adults participating than lower-status adults

Figure 5 contrasts rates of participation in AE between adults for whom neither parent completed upper secondary education (an indication of low socioeconomic background) and adults for whom at least one parent completed higher than upper secondary education (an indication of high socioeconomic background). While much socioeconomic background information is not captured in PIAAC (e.g., income, wealth, and parents' occupation), parents' educational background is one of the most important predictors of income, wealth, and occupation. The cross-country pattern is very similar to that of contrasts made between adults with high and low levels of initial education and functional literacy. The higher probability of adults with higher socioeconomic background status to participate remains in most countries even after adjusting for other characteristics (19 out of the 22 countries).

In summary, most countries display unequal chances to participate in AE by all major sociodemographic factors. Some countries, however, are much more effective at attenuating the level of inequality. These tend to be the same countries that display the highest rates of AE activity (e.g., Nordic countries in group 1). Although various

Table 1 Participation rate in AE, GDP per capita, and functional literacy rates

	Participation rate in AE (%)	GDP per capita (PPP) 2012	Percentage of adults scoring at Level 3 or higher on the PIAAC literacy scale
Group 1 (60% or greater)	66	46,859	54
Denmark	67	42,787	49
Finland	66	39,160	64
Sweden	66	42,865	50
Norway	65	66,135	45
Netherlands	65	43,348	62
Group 2 (50–59%)	54	38,467	50
USA	59	51,689	41
Canada	58	42,114	46
UK	56	35,471	36
Germany	54	41,923	55
Estonia	53	24,260	60
Ireland	51	43,803	41
Korea	50	30,011	72
Group 3 (40–49%)	47	36,109	53
Czech Republic	49	27,527	54
Austria	49	44,141	47
Belgium	48	40,835	58
Spain	46	32,559	36
Japan	42	35,482	72
Group 4 (30–39%)	36	29,083	50
Cyprus	38	30,768[a]	40
France	36	36,933	49
Poland	35	22,782	61
Slovak Republic	33	25,848	49
Group 5 (20–29%)	24	34,141	43
Italy	24	34,141	43
Group 6 (less than 20%)	10	9,775	
Brazil	15	14,551[a]	
Vietnam	5	4,998[a]	

Sources: GDP data from OECD database; those with [a] are from World Bank database.

historical, social, and cultural factors are behind this, the Nordic countries share a strong record of public policy that aims to promote AE, foster favourable structural conditions, target various barriers to participation, and ensure that disadvantaged groups have equal opportunity to take up AE. Most notably, results reveal that major differences among countries are not necessarily the level of economic development or the existence of barriers to participation—but, rather, the conditions that allow persons and groups to overcome the diverse barriers that adults face in accessing AE (Desjardins and Rubenson 2013).

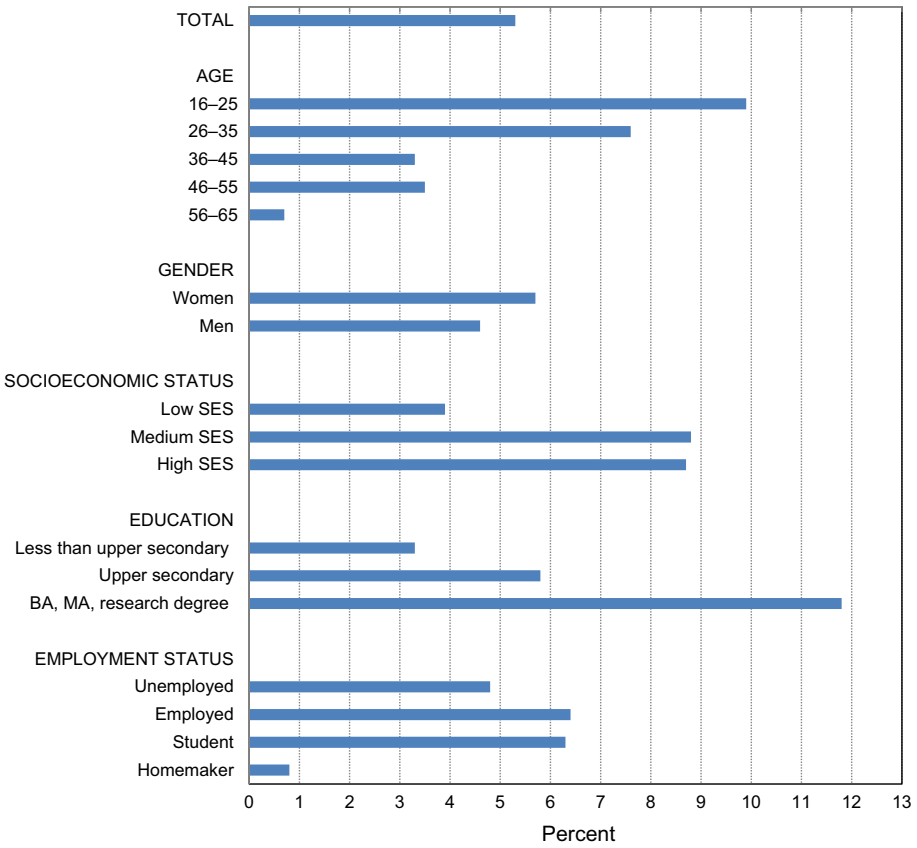

Fig. 6 Percentage of adults aged 16 to 65 who participated in AE in the 12 months preceding the survey, Vietnam
Source: Authors' calculations based on WB STEP database, 2013

Trends in participation

When we compare results from PIAAC 2012 to our own calculations from the 1994–1998 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), we see an upward trend in participation in AE over an approximate 15-year period in all countries that participated in both surveys (Figure 7). Only Italy displays a marginal difference in participation rate. But comparing PIAAC with other EU sources—such as the EU Adult Education Survey and Labour Force Surveys—does not necessarily reveal the same ranking of countries, trends, or similar results. Ascertaining trends of participation in AE with confidence is very difficult, even where comparative data exist; it is too difficult to monitor and evaluate discrepancies and/or volatility (due to design differences or nonsampling errors) in large-scale cross-national comparative studies. With these caveats in mind, the trend over a longer period—ranging between 15–20 years—is likely positive for most high-income countries; however, given volatility and discrepancies amongst available sources, it is probably unwise to draw conclusive results on trends over shorter periods of time.

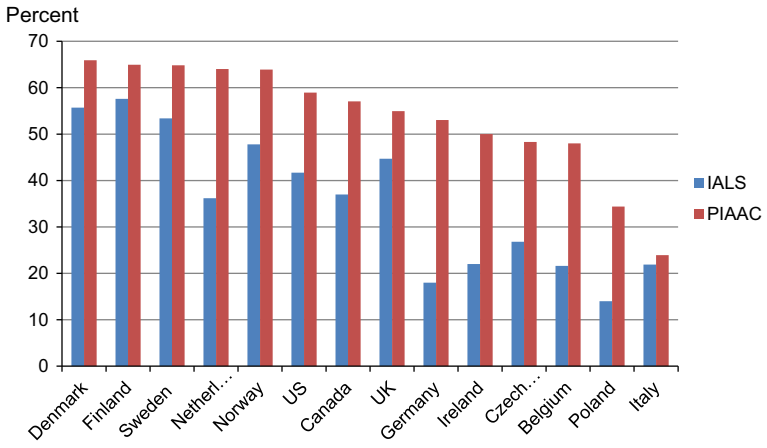

Fig. 7 Percentage of adults aged 25 to 65 who participated in AE in the 12 months preceding the surveys IALS 1994–1998 and PIAAC 2012

What drives the level and distribution of participation in AE?

Policy matters

Policymakers and stakeholders relevant to AE must strive to understand better the barriers and enablers to boosting investment and fostering equitable access to AE. Diverse barriers lead to a low supply of, and low demand for, AE. (See Rubenson and Desjardins [2009] for a theoretical discussion linking these to policy frameworks in different countries.)

On the supply side, the institutions and governance mechanisms that underlie the provision and financing of AE may be weak, left to the market, or, in some cases, absent altogether. A predominant tendency is to underinvest in AE (OECD 2005). This is especially the case when a country leaves it up to the market to coordinate AE activity. The marketplace has poor availability of information to coordinate demand and supply, poor information on rewards, and generally misaligned incentives among stakeholders (individuals, employers, government) (Desjardins and Rubenson 2013).

On the demand side, the prevailing structural relations in society lead to many barriers faced by individuals, and hence their demand for AE. For example, policy domains and structural relations seem to be key—such as those between the state and individuals, families, or households, as reflected by social policies involving family, health, education, and other welfare matters; between employers and individuals; and between the state and employers, as reflected in labour market and social protection policies.

Most barriers to participation in AE are embedded in socioeconomic and cultural structures regarding how particular societies organize access to, and participation in, education and training. Unless policy consciously redresses these structures, FE systems tend to reinforce social inequalities (as classically described by Bourdieu and Passeron [1970]). Patterns of inequality in AE participation thus reflect broader social inequalities in income, educational attainment, and, more generally, the distribution of qualifications. Such patterns tend to mirror the distribution of resources and power, and, more precisely, exemplify a particular country's prevailing notions of justice, rights, responsibilities, and entitlements. Beyond addressing political issues of societies' unequal distribution of

resources and power, and their concomitant redistributive and welfare policies, a key role for public policy is to foster governance and institutional structures relevant to AE that identify and resolve misaligned incentives among stakeholders, share information, and, not least, coordinate solutions that optimize the level, distribution, and types of investments.

Policymakers have at their disposal both demand- and supply-side policies to boost investment and redress inequalities in AE access. These impact the roles and behaviours of different stakeholders—individuals, employers, public institutions—vis-à-vis the provision and take-up of AE opportunities. Supply-side policies, for example, include targeting subsidies directly to providers, whereas demand-side policies would target subsidies, such as training vouchers, directly to individuals rather than to providers (e.g., Austria, Germany, Sweden). Not surprisingly, countries with low participation rates in AE tend to lack elaborated policy agendas, whether demand- or supply-side policies; or, where the rhetoric exists, it is often not backed up with funds and active or effective institutions and governance structures.

Fostering demand for compensatory and complementary forms of AE

There are several types of AE, but it is useful to distinguish between compensatory and complementary types. Compensatory types include basic education, literacy programs, and second-chance opportunities to attain formal qualifications. Complementary types include on-the-job training, continuing vocational or professional training, and adult higher education. The two overlap; for example, some forms of job-related training may be linked to basic or literacy education. While imperfect, the distinction is helpful for contextualizing the sharp differences in the level of investment in AE among more- and less-developed countries.

In many countries, there is simply a problem of low demand among the adult population (Figure 8). However, this is closely interconnected with provision, financing, and

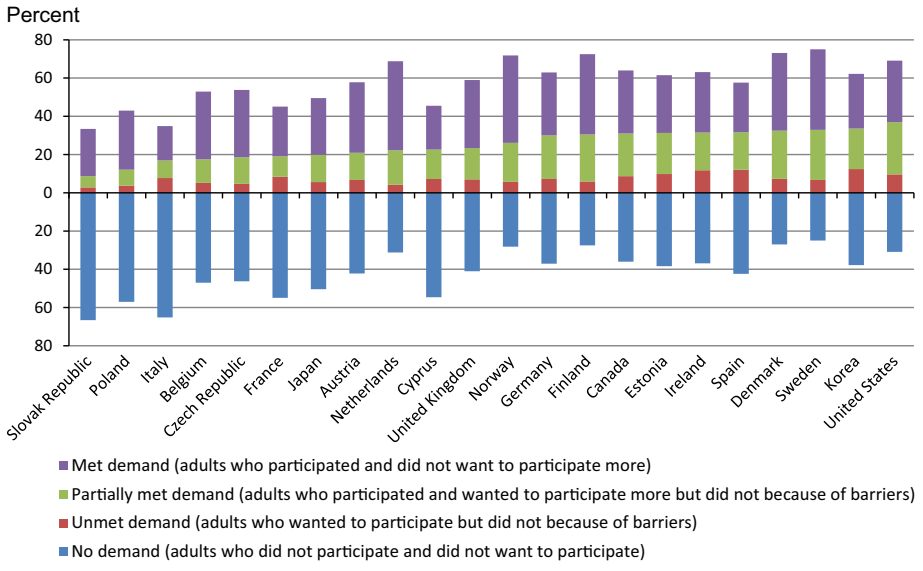

Fig. 8 Met demand, unmet demand, and no demand
Note: Countries are ranked in ascending order of the combined percentage of unmet and partially met demand.

governance structures—demand and supply tend to go hand-in-hand. Accordingly, a key role for the stakeholders underlying active governance and institutional structures is to devise public policies that incentivize and foster individual demand. Examples of the broad kinds of policy responses that may help to achieve this are those that:

- Provide information on available opportunities
- Provide information on potential rewards and associated risks
- Pool risks to individuals with firms and government, such as the risks of unemployment and of skill mismatch
- Ensure recognition and valuation of prior learning
- Free up time from family-related obligations (e.g., child care)
- Free up time from job-related obligations (e.g., paid and unpaid leave)
- Mitigate financial constraints (e.g., loans, tax incentives)

Figure 8 shows the extent of unmet and only partially met demand for AE in different countries. "Unmet demand" refers to adults who wanted to participate but did not because of barriers. "Partially met demand" refers to adults who participated and wanted to participate more but did not because of barriers. Even in countries with high levels of investment in AE, there is a significant unmet demand. In several countries, led by the USA and Korea, up to one third of adults reported that they wanted to participate in AE but did not because of barriers. These data suggest a need for better policies to boost provision and redress the barriers underlying unmet demand. In many other countries, however, demand simply remains very low, requiring policies to boost it. In Italy and the Slovak Republic, more than 65% of adults did not participate and did not want to participate. This is also often the case in many developing countries.

A key role for public policy vis-à-vis the above-mentioned structurally based barriers is to incentivize and foster employer demand and support for AE. Examples of the kind of broad policy responses that may help to achieve this are to:

- Promote the use of existing skills
- Avoid low-skill equilibrium traps (Redding 1996)
- Foster employer support (e.g., financing, time off, flexible work arrangements)
- Promote the pooling of risks with other firms and stakeholders
- Promote coordination with stakeholders on skill needs (e.g., between providers, unions, and other firms)

The world of work

In more developed economies, AE has, indeed, grown tremendously over the last three decades, primarily as a consequence of employer investment in it. This goes hand-in-hand with the rise of information and knowledge occupations, which increasingly rely on continuous learning over the lifespan of workers. It is also related to intensified global competition. The biggest investors in AE are large firms that compete on a global scale, continuously adapt and adjust to technologies, and are subject to innovation (OECD 2005).

Consequently, policies that address only complementary forms may boost overall AE activity but may also lead to high levels of inequality. Thus, a key role for public policy is to ensure that AE also meets public demand that is not aligned with employer demand. Examples of the broad kinds of policy responses that may help to achieve this are those that:

- Foster a good skill base for knowledge economies (e.g., computerize public services)

- Foster flexible pathways (e.g., avoid dead-ends, promote nontraditional students, distance education)
- Foster relevant and responsive provision to individual, employer, and public demand
- Foster flexible learning methods
- Foster community learning
- Foster active citizenship (e.g., involving social action)
- Foster active aging

The evolution of AE policies of equitable distribution of opportunities: Three case studies

Here, we consider some aspects of evolving and recent AE policy-setting in Norway, Korea, and Vietnam, relating to the level and distribution of AE opportunities. We chose these countries to provide a selected overview of policy-related trends and issues beyond OECD contexts as well as in multiple UNESCO regions.

Norway

As revealed by the cross-country patterns presented in Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, Norway—like its Nordic neighbours—has high and widely distributed levels of AE. Norway's AE system is well developed and offers a diverse range of means and ends to encourage adults to improve their skills via different pathways for learning. The system's development is rooted in a rich history and culture related to AE practices, a strong public policy record on AE, and other social and welfare policies that affect AE participation. Access to education up to upper secondary levels and to higher education are rights enshrined in law; AE structures play an important role in helping individuals to fulfil those rights. A rich tradition also exists for supporting AE that is not directly for qualification purposes or job-related, but is focused instead on personal development and the development of democracy. AE is seen as means to activate citizenship and participate in society.

As recently as the 1990s, Norway initiated several institutional reforms to strengthen its already strong AE system; these reforms led to a dramatic boost in the level and distribution of AE. In 1999, the "competence reform" provided a statutory right to adults born after 1978 to primary and secondary education, and introduced the option for adults aged 25 or older to access higher education on the basis of recognized nonformal/informal competencies. Reforms in 1999 also introduced legal rights to study leave for adults (Desjardins, in press). Specifically, the wider reforms mandated rights that allowed adults who have been in the workforce for three years or more, and at the same company for at least two years, to take up to three years off to attend an organized course of education on a part- or full-time basis.

In 2006, the government again promoted a major initiative (Programme for Basic Competence in Working Life [BCWL]) to fund employers to implement courses for employees with low levels of general skills (UIL 2012). Helping to circumvent the market tendencies that exacerbate inequalities, BCWL fosters awareness and direct support for employees who otherwise would tend not to obtain employer support. The funds for this initiative have since increased from 14 million NOK to 105 million NOK, which has gone to nearly 700 firms. To qualify, courses must be flexible, encourage motivation among participants, and teach basic skills in the context of job-related activities. The initiative is stakeholder-based. Study associations help firms go through the funding application

process; special effort is made to channel funds to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The initiative has been successful in helping to redress age-related inequalities in access to AE—over 61% of participants in 2012 were over the age of 40. Difficulties remain, however. For example, evaluations show that firms that have high numbers of employees with low skills tend to not participate in the programme. However, there are indications that this is changing, with firms in the construction and retail sector beginning to take advantage of the programme.

An important aspect that makes the Norwegian AE system advanced is the diversity of provision. Apart from a focus on the work environment (as through the BCWL program), AE is variously provided outside the formal system (e.g., folk high schools, educational associations, language training centres for immigrants, and distance education) (Desjardins, in press). Further, the focus is broader than workplace skills; it includes such other goals as cultural learning and personal/family development. This is especially important as key skills useful for the economy—for example, nonroutine cognition and nonroutine communication—are not neatly distinguishable from similar skills used in civic society. Diverse provision is thus significant for boosting demand because it can help adults who would otherwise not be interested in participating in AE.

Despite the advanced nature of the Norwegian system, improvements are still necessary. Even with concerted policy efforts, effective initiatives, and public financing, it remains particularly difficult to improve the completion rates among nontraditional students from disadvantaged populations. Overall, adults with weaker basic skills and lower levels of education, as well as those with difficulties on the labour market (i.e., those in precarious and low-skill jobs), have lower representation in the very initiatives that were created to benefit them. Targeted efforts, indeed, boost AE demand. However, in order to raise the demand further, particularly among disadvantaged populations, earmarking funds for specific groups is necessary, as is careful attention to address AE's relevance and incentives among disadvantaged groups.

Korea

Korea has enacted a highly advanced institutional structure to govern and develop AE. The revised 2007 Lifelong Education Act implemented a comprehensive governance structure to oversee policy planning, coordination, development, and implementation of its AE system, including a National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE), Regional Institutes for Lifelong Education, and Local Lifelong Learning Centres. In addition to promotional activities to mobilize stakeholders—such as a campaign to select and develop lifelong learning cities and the annual lifelong learning festival—the government trains specialized personnel (lifelong education officers) to plan, administer, analyze, evaluate, and teach lifelong education policies and practices. The number of lifelong educator certificates issued in 2012 was 8,153, up more than four-fold since 2000; the total number of officer certificates issued between 2000 and 2012 was nearly 63,000. In line with the growth of governance and provision structures and personnel, data on participation rates over time show an increase from about 26% of adults in 2008 to about 36% in 2012 (KEDI 2013).

While NILE's stated purpose for developing the AE system is to promote economic capacity and national competitiveness, it also clearly lays out goals to promote individual citizens' self-actualization and community development, and to improve the cultural and political capacity of both individuals and local communities (NILE 2014). As one sees in Figure 1, this goal is more than simply rhetoric, as Korea has one of the most developed AE systems for non-job-related reasons among the countries with available data.

Korea has especially well developed policy efforts to boost employer investment in AE, particularly among SMEs—as of 2011, they employ 87% of the workforce and comprise more than 99% of all firms in the country. Engaging SMEs in workplace training is a well-known challenge (OECD 2003) because they lack the administrative and managerial capacity as well as funds. Consequently, SMEs tend to underinvest in AE and require policy attention.

The Korean government has four well-developed initiatives to directly target SME employees. First, it introduced a SMEs Training Consortium Programme in 2003 (renamed Consortium for HRD Ability Magnified Programme [CHAMP] in 2012). As of 2013, 159 training consortiums were in operation (CHAMP 2014). The consortiums are stakeholder-based, involving different firms, higher education institutions, public and private training providers, and the relevant SMEs as key actors. Stakeholders work together to identify training needs, develop training programmes, and manage administrative tasks for obtaining public subsidies (Kis and Park 2012). Consortiums may receive subsidies covering all costs for facilities and personnel. By 2012, the initiative has grown to cover over 271,000 employees and nearly 115,000 SMEs (MOEL 2013). Despite this increase, growth of training output has not met expectations (Lee 2009).

Second, the government provides subsidies for targeted advanced training programmes. Qualified employees are trained free of charge at vocational training institutions with state-of-the-art facilities and equipment, and their employers receive part of their labour costs. The number of applicants has grown from about 19,000 in 2006 to about 38,000 in 2012 (MOEL 2013).

Third, since 2006 the government also provides subsidies for organized study within SMEs. Support is available for one year at a time and renewable for up to three years, based on results. In 2010, 315 SMEs received subsidies (HRDSK 2013).

Lastly, the government provides subsidies—for SME employees and nonregular workers—for self-directed learning through the Job Upgrading and Maturing Programme. This learning involves module-based training courses on either weekends or weeknights to allow mobility. In 2010, over 57,000 workers had their costs covered entirely for this programme.

Vietnam

Vietnam has undergone significant growth in the last 20 years. It has placed a high priority on education, and has high enrolment in school and high literacy rates. Nonetheless, access to education differs drastically depending on geographical location and other characteristics reflecting disadvantage. Minorities tend to receive fewer social benefits than other groups, including health and education services and access to income-generating activities. Since 1997, the government has invested more policy attention and funds in AE (VMOET 2009). Literacy is understood as an important step in creating a more equitable society. Efforts include a comprehensive national policy for AE, improving the quality and relevance of programmes, and targeting out-of-school youth and women from disadvantaged backgrounds.

NFE appeared in the national education law in 1998. Although it was initially narrow and focused on literacy, an amendment in 2005 sought to integrate NFE, literacy training, and other AE as a major component within the overall educational system. This included provisions for skill advancement in the workplace, second-chance opportunities linked to the FE system, and the development of people as citizens and essential participants within communities. Programmes are now diverse and aspire to account for many different needs

of the population. Examples include programmes focused on HIV prevention, peace and human rights, gender issues, healthcare for mothers and children, drug prevention, nutrition, and the environment.

Participation rates in AE have risen over recent years. According to annual statistics, participants in 2008 numbered almost 10 million (compared to 594,159 in 1999). Assuming 70% of the total population (92 million) are aged 15 to 65, this translates into a participation rate of approximately 15% (three times the rate estimated by World Bank STEP project in 2013). The discrepancy is probably due to inadequate coverage of rural areas in STEP, where Community Learning Centres (CLCs) are prominent.

Adopted officially, CLCs now represent the most important platform in Vietnam for accessing AE opportunities—by 2010, Vietnam had nearly 10,000 CLCs (UNESCO 2010). A stated goal of the CLCs is to be a pillar in Vietnam's work toward becoming a modernized and industrialized nation by 2020 (Okukawa 2009). They are important due to their potential for grass-roots mobilization of participants. Special focus is given to people who are illiterate and have no FE experience, drop-outs, minorities, rural populations, and other disadvantaged adults, but any educational activity can be carried out as long as it responds to community needs (Okukawa 2009). CLCs have proved to be an effective model, especially for teaching literacy. Their central focus is community literacy, which is believed to have had a major impact on the increase in literacy rates since 2000 (Zolfaghari, Sabran, and Zolfaghari 2009).

CLCs depend on outside support but, in principle, operate alongside community stakeholders, who are co-responsible for implementation. For example, community stakeholders are responsible to identify the most pressing needs of the region and most effectively implement and evaluate educational programmes in those locales (Okukawa 2009). CLCs play a critical role in connecting with social actors in the community. They also allow separate educational programmes to come together, improving coordination, resource use, and effectiveness. Integrating individuals and agencies from various sectors, not just from education, greatly expands the scope of educational activities (Okukawa 2009). CLCs are part of a broader education- and literacy-training framework put forward in 1998 by UNESCO's Asia-Pacific programme of Education for All, with financial support from Japan and Norway (Zolfaghari, Sabran, and Zolfaghari 2009). As part of the framework, CLCs do not necessarily need new buildings for education programs; existing schools, health centres, and religious establishments (even homes) are all locations where education can flourish. This is an example of good practice in sharing resources.

Despite the AE sector's apparent progress and the policy attention that it has received in the last decade, a systemic lack of funding threatens further progress, quality, and sustainability. The bulk of investment comes from modest grants that the state provides. (New CLCs receive $1,500 to begin activities, and annual grants of $1,000–1,200.) Lack of financing is the main issue hindering AE development. Some CLCs can supplement with funds from private donors, student fees, NGOs, or other aid; but most CLCs suffer from a shortage of funds, which limits the scope and impact of activities. For example, their heavy reliance on volunteers remains a threat to their sustainability and effectiveness. Most CLC teachers have not attained an upper secondary education, and 77% are volunteers. Consequently, only 20–30% of CLCs are thought to operate effectively (UNESCO 2010).

Vietnam continues to rely on aid for both financial and technical assistance—for example, in training and developing personnel to carry out the programs. In reality, the government does not offer substantial support to AE. In 2005, it allocated less than $600,000 to AE, or less than 2.85% of the education budget (VMOET 2009). This is somewhat short of the 3% of national education budgets that the Global Campaign for

Education (2005) recommends for AE; but, more importantly, it is far short of the additional 3 % recommended for supporting literacy training efforts. As such, it brings into question sustainability and the government's commitment to boost AE levels and provide equitable access. Despite AE's presence in virtually all regions of the country and its progress in attracting an increasing number of participants, the proportion of people in AE is still low compared to the numbers of those who could potentially benefit.

Conclusions

The following summarizes key problems and constraints relating to AE, as well as ways forward and action options. These emerge from an analysis of cross-national patterns of participation, the AE developments discussed in the three case studies above, and other analyses of the UNESCO survey findings on AE in member countries in 2009 and again in 2012 (Desjardins 2013).

Key problems and constraints

Lack of consistent and reliable data

Given the many stakeholders involved, it is challenging to get an overview of the resources used and required, and how these are changing over time. Few efforts have been made to set up administrative or survey data that permit measurement of costs or benefits for different types of AE provision—even though indications suggest these are significant (Schuller et al. 2002). Consequently, communicating the benefits of AE, including its monetary and nonmonetary dimensions, is difficult. Policy debates regarding AE are thus poorly informed, and decisions to invest in AE are fraught with imperfections. This lack of information means that many governments cannot establish AE priorities, budget adequate resources, or justify investments in AE. Likewise, firms and individuals have difficulty assessing the costs and benefits, which leads to reduced investment.

Constrained resources from all sources

All sources of funding face severe constraints, some much more than others. In the face of competing claims on the public purse, governments are constantly under pressure to limit spending. This highlights the importance of, and need for, good data on AE. And while employers have an incentive to invest in AE, they are also under pressure to control costs, especially in competitive environments. In the absence of appropriate incentives, some firms choose low-skills strategies to compete in product and service markets (Brown, Green, and Lauder 2001). Individuals are equally constrained, foremost by their own income but also by the risk of losing their jobs. This is especially acute among the most vulnerable.

Investment is thus highly dependent on the perception of the benefits to be gained, and by whom. Combined with poor information, these conditions often mean that those who stand to gain give priority to other activities. Indeed, AE remains marginal and underfunded in low- and middle-income countries.

Low commitment for AE

Countries around the globe differ markedly in whether they have a strategy to ensure adequate AE resources. They also differ in their priorities, pace of progress, and availability of information for assessing progress. An overwhelming reality, however, is that AE is a marginal element on most countries' agendas, including those of several high-income countries. Many mandates to improve AE structures remain unfunded and neglected, and often receive low priority in public budgets. Budgeted funds are sometimes not released because they are kept as an option, either with implicit or explicit clauses, to be released only if other priorities are met. In developing countries, this means AE funds are often diverted to compensate for shortfalls in the primary or secondary education budget. This problem can be exacerbated when budgetary processes are decentralized, because some communities may be more susceptible to financial strain or because their priorities diverge from central government policies. Even in high-income countries with universal primary education and high rates of upper secondary completion, the OECD takes the position that levels of investment in AE are too low (OECD 2003).

Tendency for government support to go to those already better off

Many governments recognize a role for public investment in AE, either for correcting market failures or for redressing social disadvantages. But unless government support is carefully designed, it tends to go to adults who already receive AE (Desjardins and Rubenson 2013). When targeted, government support can reach adults most in need, but only if funds are earmarked and complemented with outreach activities—often this is more expensive. Otherwise, support rarely reaches adults in need. This is especially true when market or quasi-market mechanisms are used; programmes with eligibility criteria are equally divisive. Enforcing accountability measures for NGOs' use of public funds can also lead to barriers for disadvantaged groups: the tendency is to recruit those most likely to succeed in reaching the stated learning outcomes or other criteria. Unless funds are earmarked, specific programmes—even AE initiatives with pronounced ambitions to reach disadvantaged adults—may provide services that correspond better to the needs of the advantaged.

Lack of incentive to invest among private sources

For many countries, progress depends on their ability to mobilize private resources to supplement public AE funding. But, for the reasons mentioned, many employers and individuals lack incentives to invest. In some cases, employers are reluctant if the programme offers general skills, because employees may then become more employable at a competing firm, and the sponsoring firm may lose its investment. In practice, many firms choose to invest in general skills anyway, as they are difficult to distinguish from specific skills (and since several other labour-market imperfections exist), but incentives remain poorly aligned.

Governments handle these incentive problems in diverse ways. They commonly use favourable tax treatments; examples exist of mandated outlays, such as levy systems, that promote AE. Nevertheless, countries often lack policies that comprehensively address incentive problems and other market failures; in many cases, such policies are absent entirely.

Incentive strategies exacerbate inequalities

Where incentive strategies do exist, there is a tendency to rely on quasi-market–based approaches. But without targeted strategies, such approaches—with incentives aimed at employers and individuals—can increase disparities. Unfortunately, policy circles seem unwilling to address the implications for AE distribution of the increasing impact of employer funding. A common position is that it is not feasible to expect the public purse to cover the new demands, and that the private sector must contribute to AE. But evidence suggests that there is a strong role for the public sector—that is, if countries are to take seriously the issues of equity—and that the evidence (albeit imperfect) concerning market failures must be acknowledged.

The complexity of market failures

Structural reform is the best approach to correct for market failures and inequities. For example, redefining public-private sector boundaries in the AE sector and better aligning the incentives to invest; however, there are many reasons why this is difficult. First, many of the failures are due to natural imperfections that are difficult to overcome; and stakeholders have not yet devised any viable strategies to do so. Rarely do the mechanisms created to carry out government strategies genuinely address the nature of the problem—for example, inequality—or the forces that drive it. To do so requires in-depth and ongoing public policy analysis, which demands technical capacity and well-established, as well as responsive governances and provision structures in AE.

Second, some imperfections do not relate solely to AE, and thus reforms should not be undertaken without consideration of relevant trade-offs with other sectors. For example, they may be linked to initial education structures that promote narrow vocational pathways, or with occupational and industrial structures that encourage a low-skills equilibrium in the economy (Brown, Green, and Lauder 2001). Accordingly, it is necessary to coordinate approaches across policy sectors, both private and public.

Ways forward and action options

Mobilize resources among stakeholders

Foster demand and incentives among stakeholders to invest, including through tax and institutional arrangements that favour cost-sharing. Promote cofinancing schemes that channel resources from at least two parties.

Assert a strong role for public funding

While nongovernmental resources need to be mobilized, it is also important for public authorities to renew commitments to increase targeted funding for disadvantaged groups. Governments need to assert a stronger role in devising policies that comprehensively address market failures. Market-based principles cannot solve everything. Focusing only on regulatory and institutional arrangements to enhance private-sector investments—as is the trend in many high-income countries—is not enough, especially if countries want to avoid growing inequalities and underinvestment in AE.

Earmark funds for targeting strategies

Government support for disadvantaged groups should be complemented with targeting strategies. This includes special outreach, guidance activities, and earmarking funds for certain groups. Such measures are based on the assumption that certain groups must use a specific proportion of the available funds. The most significant challenge will be to stimulate demand among those groups for whom these measures are taken.

Integrate AE into a broader development and poverty-reduction strategy

Publicly funded AE has a strong role to play in preventing and alleviating adverse conditions such as unemployment and large-scale displacements associated with modernization and other structural changes. This is equally applicable to community development in low- and middle-income countries. Rather than using passive transfers of aid to individuals, communities, or nations, policymakers need a renewed commitment to using AE as a mechanism for activating development. AE should be a central element of any development strategy and feature more prominently in poverty-reduction strategies (PRSPs).

Fund and help to coordinate NGOs but leave them to fend for themselves

NGOs are important for providing AE, but they lack recognition; they need adequate public funding and government support. This sector is more flexible and adapts to new demands faster than the formal system; moreover, it seems to reach adults who otherwise would not enroll in AE.

The integration of the voluntary sector into a comprehensive AE policy can be successful only if direct state intervention is avoided but public funds are provided. Thus, policymakers should seek to remove bureaucratic barriers that prevent operation or access to funds. As long as NGOs fulfil the goals for which state funding is received, the sector must be left to fend for itself. At the same time, a mechanism for coordination and information sharing is essential—currently, effective coordination is rare among the many NGOs. This leads to inefficiencies, such as parallel structures of provision, even though clear advantages exist to sharing facilities and staff. Collaboration between providers can cut programme development costs and may allow for a more efficient use of accommodation and equipment.

Develop enduring governance and provision structures

It is necessary to adapt a sustainable strategy to develop AE, one in which public investment is adequate, consistent, and proportionate to GDP over the long run. This includes the need for continuous policy and institutional development. Developing a diversified, integrated, and holistic AE sector demands sustained investment, which can only happen with concrete political commitments at all levels. External aid should only be seen as a way to achieve accelerated progress in this respect.

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