Approaches to Equity in Policy for Lifelong Learning

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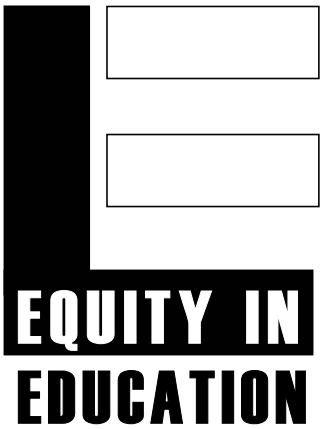

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Origins of this report

In 1996, OECD Education ministers adopted 'lifelong learning for all' as a policy framework. Since that time, the OECD has conducted a considerable amount of work on various aspects of lifelong learning, including thematic reviews of early childhood education, transitions from school to work, adult education, and the first years of tertiary education (OECD 1998, 2000, 2001c, 2002, 2003).

The 2001 OECD Education Policy Analysis (OECD, 2001a), on the theme of "Lifelong Learning for All: Policy Directions", reviewed much of this work and identified some of the key policy dimensions that required ongoing attention. Although the concept of lifelong learning remains vague in many ways, it has captured public imagination and exerted a strong impact on education policy making in many countries, raising issues such as the need for better integration across elements of the learning system.

One of the five major issues in the 2001 analysis was the need to ensure that access to and the benefits of lifelong learning are shared by all members of society. As a result, the OECD has commissioned this paper on equity in policy for lifelong learning.

Summary of the report

The paper is in two main parts. The first provides a conceptual discussion of equity and policy in education, attempting to develop a framework for thinking about the issues and the options that countries have for addressing them. The second part of the paper examines the ways in which the issues have been defined in this work and the kinds of strategies countries are using to address equity concerns. A brief concluding section develops some suggestions for further analysis.

The report begins with a brief discussion of the importance of equity issues in learning. Equity is important not only out of a duty of fairness to all members of a society, but also because countries as a whole are better off when the benefits of learning are widely shared and the gaps are minimized between the most and least advantaged. However educational equity does not seem to be improving in many countries, and may be getting worse in some cases.

The paper then develops a conceptual framework for thinking about equity issues in lifelong learning. At each level of education there are two main axes of concern with equity issues. One has to do with overall provision and the second concerns provision for groups that are more marginalized. The importance of ensuring both access and benefit across societies requires particular attention to groups or categories where participation and success have usually been less satisfactory. These include women,

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[2] This paper was commissioned by the OECD as part of its preparation for additional work on the subject of equity. However the paper does not necessarily represent the policy or opinion of the OECD or any other official body. All opinions and any errors are solely the responsibility of the author. I thank Abrar Hasan, Maria-Luisa Ferreira, and Andreas Schleicher for assisting my work on this paper. Several OECD colleagues provided helpful comments on an earlier draft. I also express my appreciation to the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne for hosting me during much of the writing of this paper.

ethnic minorities (indigenous, immigrant, and other), persons with disabilities, and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Issues and needs can vary across these target groups. Two fundamental ideas of equity are then developed – equity as equality of opportunity and equity as equality of results, each of which has different implications for policy.

This is followed by a very brief discussion of some of the components and limits of government policy-making and a list of policy levers that governments may use to address particular issues. The last section of this first part of the paper outlines a taxonomy of policy strategies that could be used to address equity issues in learning. Approaches are described under three general headings – encouraging individual participation and success (for example financial and non-financial incentives), changing institutional delivery systems (for example new programs or modes of delivery), and changes aimed at broader social phenomena (for example income supports or legal measures to combat discrimination).

The second part of the report uses these conceptual tools to examine the ways in which equity concerns are being understood and addressed across the OECD as revealed in previous studies, with emphasis on the recent thematic reviews of early childhood education, transitions to work, tertiary education and adult learning. These brief reviews draw on a selection of background reports and expert notes on particular countries. Some attention is also given to the results of PISA 2000. The purpose of this analysis is to examine the extent to which equity concerns are on the policy agenda, the assumptions about problems and causes that underlie current thinking, and the policies that countries are pursuing to try to address equity concerns. The current approaches can be mapped on to the conceptual frame developed earlier to identify opportunities and gaps where further progress may be possible.

In early childhood care and development, the key equity issues identified are overall accessibility, affordability and care for target groups. Improvements in early childhood provision are high on the policy agenda of many countries.

In regard to schooling, the PISA study has provided an important indicator that it is possible to combine high standards of achievement with a relatively high degree of equity.

Transitions from school to work are strongly affected both by the nature of the education system and the overall economy. Much of the policy effort is aimed at target groups rather than at improvement in the performance of the system as a whole.

Tertiary education faces the tension between huge increases in participation and a widespread belief that quality is related to exclusivity. Concerns about general accessibility and affordability have been important policy foci, as have, at least in some countries, efforts to draw target groups into fuller participation.

Adult and workplace learning are the most diverse and amorphous parts of the education system so harder to characterize. Employers play a critical role in this sector. Equity concerns include overall access to adult learning in countries, provision for large numbers of adults with relatively low levels of formal education, and the strong tendency for participants in adult education to be people who already have higher levels of education.

A final section of the paper draws some conclusions about policy and equity from the overall review across the areas of lifelong learning. The situation as described in the thematic reviews offers grounds for optimism and also for concern. Equity is a priority issue in many settings, with a wide variety of new efforts being made. At the same time, the efforts may be too small and too narrow to address the challenges. Continued attention is needed to assess the degree of progress and develop new approaches.

PART 1 – THINKING ABOUT EQUITY IN LIFELONG LEARNING

A definition of equity?

Philosophers have been struggling for a long time to clarify what might be meant in social policy by the term 'equity'. Summarizing that discussion, let alone seeking to add to it, is beyond the capacity of the author and, fortunately, beyond the scope of this paper. There is general agreement that the aim of public policy cannot and should not be equality in the sense that everyone is the same or achieves the same outcomes – a state that appears to be both impossible and undesirable. Rather, a commitment to equity suggests that differences in outcomes should not be attributable to differences in areas such as wealth, income, power or possessions. The question is always a practical one, then, of what state or degree of inequality is acceptable.

The answer to this question will always be a contested one, fought out in political arenas of all kinds on a continuing basis. As discussed a little later, the grounds of that struggle seem to have shifted in the last 30 years towards reducing the gap in outcomes between the top and bottom by helping those at the bottom move up. This may be unsatisfactory as a definition from an analytic perspective but is workable from the standpoint of policy. The argument has been made about quality (Pirsig, 1974) that while we may not be able to define it, we know it when we see it. For equity, it may be that while we cannot define what it is, we know when we are far from it.

The importance of equity

There is a broad consensus in the OECD and beyond that lifelong learning is and should be a key feature of social development in the coming decades. The reasons for this view have been well developed elsewhere (OECD 1996, 2001a) and need not be repeated here, except to say that learning is seen as vital not just to countries' economic development but to their social cohesion and quality of life. OECD analyses have repeatedly emphasized the importance of having a broad view of the purposes and benefits of learning.

It is not just the average amount of education that is important, however, but also its distribution across the population. Equity in education is important for several reasons:

- There is surely a human rights imperative for all people to have a reasonable opportunity to develop their capacities and to participate fully in society. The right to education is recognized, for example, in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

- Insofar as opportunity is not distributed fairly there will be an underutilization of talent; some people will not develop their skills and abilities with consequent loss not only to them but to the society generally. We cannot know how many outstanding scientists, writers, artists, or teachers are lost because a significant number of people are not able to obtain the necessary learning.

- Higher levels of education are associated with almost every positive life outcome – not only with improved employment and earnings but also with health, longevity, successful parenting, civic participation, and so on (Dearden, Reed & Van Reenen, 2000; Vernez et al., 1999; Osberg, 1998). Insofar as societies contain significant numbers of people without adequate skills to

participate socially and economically, there will be higher social costs for security, health, income support, child welfare, and so on (Statistics Canada and OECD, 2001).

– Social cohesion, or trust, is itself an important factor supporting successful countries. Greater inequality is associated with lower levels of social cohesion and trust (Dayton-Johnson, 2001; Green and Preston, in press), thus hampering countries' capacities in many areas.

Increasing equity in education can thus have a range of benefits.

Current status of equity

Current data indicate that despite expansion in access to learning opportunities in most countries, educational equity 'has proved highly elusive' (OECD, 2001a, p. 73). At one level there are significant differences among countries in levels of educational achievement. The annual OECD "Education at a Glance" report shows that countries vary considerably in the proportion of young children who have access to good quality care, in the proportion of students completing secondary education, in participation in post-secondary education and in opportunities for adult education and workplace learning. However the gaps between countries, though important, are less concerning than the gaps within countries. All countries are committed to increasing educational opportunities and many have made considerable progress in this regard in the last decade or so. Participation in tertiary education, for example, has expanded substantially almost everywhere. So has access to good quality early childhood care.

Gaps between the most and least advantaged within countries, however, have not decreased, and in some cases have increased (OECD, 2001a). Inequity in various learning outcomes varies across countries. The results of PISA showed that the gap in reading achievement between from the 25th to the 75th percentile among 15 year old on a 500 point scale ranged from as little as 92 points in Korea to as much as 140 in Belgium, Germany, New Zealand, Switzerland and the United States (OECD 2001b). Similar variance can be found in other areas such as access to early childhood care, participation in post-secondary education or access to workplace learning.

Many of the country reports and background documents prepared for the thematic reviews give considerable attention to equity issues, although some others treat them rather lightly. Much of the discussion of equity is concerned with participation rates and program quality rather than on differential levels of success. In some reports there is little attention to the equity target groups. In other reports one or another of the groups gets some discussion while other important groups seem to be omitted. It is of course dangerous to draw conclusions about the state of national policy and thinking based on a single report. Nonetheless, with a few exceptions the overall impression from reading many of the background documents is that more attention is warranted to equity needs and ways of addressing them, for all reasons cited at the beginning of this paper.

In thinking about equity policy it is important to keep in mind that the four areas of education discussed in this report – early childhood development, schooling, tertiary education and adult education – have very different characteristics. Schooling at least until age 16 almost everywhere in OECD countries has compulsory attendance and well established provision. Tertiary education is also well established from the standpoint of policy and organization but voluntary and more independent of government. Provision for care for younger children is much less well developed in most countries; overall institutional and policy frameworks are only now being developed in many cases. Adult learning is the least developed of the four sectors in terms of national policy and formal institutional structures, though in many countries a wide array of programs exists.. These differences affect what is possible in each sector. The newer sectors – early childhood and adult learning – on one hand lack the capacity to undertake certain kinds of changes

without substantial additional investment and work, and on the other hand are less set in their ways and perhaps more open to a greater degree of innovation.

Two main dimensions of equity

Within the material reviewed for this report, two axes or dimensions around equity were apparent. One dimension has to do with whether overall levels of provision are sufficient and of the right kind. The specific nature of these concerns varies with the level of education and with the life stage of the learners. In early childhood a dominant concern relates to ensuring access to high quality care to all who want or need it. In addition, access to childcare is itself an equity issue for parents, especially women, in terms of their ability to participate fully in the labour force. In schooling, universal access is a given but concerns exist about equality in relation to some structures, such as the provision of special education or the distinction between general and vocational education. In relation to transitions from education to work, the overall availability of work for young people and their relative wages are important issues. The existence and quality of links between the education system and the labour market is another major area of concern. In tertiary education questions of overall accessibility arise again, especially in light of the growing international participation in this level. What level of participation in tertiary education should countries be aiming at, and what forms of provision are appropriate, especially if one takes seriously lifelong participation in tertiary education? Finally, in the area of adult and workplace learning, there are concerns about whether overall participation rates are adequate to provide the kinds of learning opportunities that are required to sustain a productive labour force and citizenry and whether these opportunities are widely and fairly distributed to those who might benefit from them.

The second dimension of equity concerns the participation and success of learners from particular groups that have tended to experience lower levels of participation and success in all areas of education. The key groups that have been identified as targets include various ethnic minorities (especially those whose first language is not that of the majority population and including, as appropriate, indigenous people and immigrants), and persons with disabilities. In almost every area and country, the outcomes for persons from these minority groups are worse than for the general population even though there are often special provisions for them. However the single strongest predictor of educational attainment, and of many other life outcomes, remains family socio-economic status, so that in all countries attention is particularly needed to the most disadvantaged segments of society. Of course there can be substantial overlap among these categories, since in many countries immigrants, persons with disabilities and single mothers are also much more likely to be poor.

Gender represents an equity dimension that is significantly different from the others because in many countries and areas of education female achievement has equaled or surpassed that of males. Indeed, there is now concern in some countries about the achievement levels of boys and young men. However gender also remains an important equity concern because women are still disadvantaged in the labour market and are still unequally represented in many areas of study and occupations.

Ideas about the causes of inequity

Policy approaches to improving equity will depend on people's ideas about the causes of inequities, whether these ideas are held explicitly or implicitly. Beliefs as to why some individuals or groups are more successful than others can be seen to vary on a continuum depending on how much of the responsibility for success is placed on the individual learner vs. the social arrangements around learning. Some might believe that innate differences in capacity are the largest determinant of differences in participation and in outcomes, differences that it would be very difficult or even impossible to overcome. Others might believe that different outcomes are primarily the result of inadequate provision or societal barriers for certain minorities, in the face of which individual effort may be largely unavailing.

A related distinction in causal frameworks is around the role of the education system itself in promoting equity. A considerable amount of the reform literature in education seems to operate from the perspective that improvements in educational outcomes depend almost entirely on changing what happens in educational institutions. However there is compelling evidence that a substantial part of the variation in educational outcomes is linked to forces outside the education system – primarily family socio-economic status, but also language, ethnicity and immigration status (Duru-Bellat, 2000; Levin, 1995; Mortimore & Whitty, 1997; Thrupp, 1999). The implication might be that efforts to promote equity in education cannot rely solely on schools but must also include policy options around issues that are largely outside the educational system.

As a result of varying ideas about the causes of inequality, people also have different views of what a society's responsibility may be for addressing equity. Historically there have been two main approaches to addressing equity in education. One focuses on what is called 'equality of opportunity'. In this view, it is access to education that is critical. The responsibility of the state is to provide opportunities to participate; whether people choose to take advantage of that access or are successful in doing so should not be a primary focus of public policy. The second view is more concerned with equity in the results of education, such as graduation and access to employment. From this perspective, providing the same opportunity is not enough because different people will need different kinds of opportunities and some people will need more support in order to be successful. We should therefore be concerned when the outcomes of education are inequitable, whatever the official opportunities are.

The two views have substantially different implications for policy. Achieving equality of opportunity requires only that access to education be reasonably fairly distributed. It is assumed that various factors might still result in quite unequal results. However as one moves towards an 'equality of results' perspective, the requirement to make different provision or provide additional assistance to the least successful also grows.

In practice education policy has seen elements of both perspectives, but with a steady shift conceptually in recent decades towards an 'equality of outcomes' view. At its worst, an 'equality of opportunity' perspective could be - and was - held to justify school provision that was segregated on the basis of ethnicity or religion even though services were manifestly unequal. Such views are now largely, though not entirely, discredited. However in some areas, such as higher education in many countries, equal opportunity still means only that everyone has an equal right to meet the entrance requirements, even if actual participation remains skewed towards higher income social groups.

Generally education policy has been shifting with the awareness that participation is not enough; there must also be a substantial degree of success, and this will require different kinds of programs and supports to meet different needs. In early childhood education and care attention is growing towards the needs of the impoverished as well as towards minority language and ethnic communities. The development of schooling for children with disabilities has moved increasingly towards providing the additional supports that children require to be successful. Ethnic segregation in schools is less acceptable, though by no means eliminated. The International Adult Literacy Study (IALS) both reflected and contributed towards increasing attention to the learning needs of adults with low levels of literacy. An increasing focus on equality of results is a logical concomitant of the growing importance of high levels of education for all as a policy objective.

An equality of opportunity perspective brings its own dilemmas and issues. One problem is determining how much provision or support is enough. As countries have discovered with the expansion of special education, there is virtually no limit to the additional supports and services that might be provided to assist people with their education. Issues of cost-effectiveness become very difficult because they get entangled with issues of fundamental human rights. Moreover, some elements of equity support

remain highly controversial, as debates around affirmative action or employment equity provisions indicate. Still, attention to outcomes instead of provision has moved the policy debate in a useful direction.

Barriers to increased equity

The barriers to improving equity are relatively simply to state but extremely difficult to overcome. They are essentially two – will and capacity. 'Will' speaks to public and individual willingness to take steps to improve equity. 'Capacity' speaks to our knowledge of what to do and our ability to do what is needed even if we know what it is. Neither is a simple matter.

One often hears talk of 'the need for political will', as if it were only a question of the right people making up their minds to do something. People usually speak this way when they want someone to do something that the person in questions thinks is either undesirable or unpopular or both. This is not the place for a treatise on the nature of politics, but it can be said that for action not only to occur but to have lasting impact it requires significant and ongoing support that has to be built and sustained over time. Otherwise one runs the risk – well documented in practice in many places – of actions being taken that either have no effect or are soon reversed because they are not acceptable to enough people.

A classic example has to do with targeting social policy. Efficiency suggests that a policy targeted towards those in need will provide better value for resources invested. Universal programs often provide benefits to people who do not really need them. They may even constitute reverse subsidies, in which poorer taxpayers contribute funds to the benefit of those who are already better off. But targeted programs are much more vulnerable to political attack precisely because their benefits are not broadly shared (Heclo, 1986). An example is tertiary tuition fees. Free or low tuition could be seen as a reverse subsidy given the skewed nature of tertiary participation but low tuition has much greater political appeal than a program of higher tuition coupled with targeted grants to those in need. Many other examples could be cited to illustrate the problem.

Because equity is by definition about the distribution of goods it is almost always politically contentious. Whatever one may think about the range of views expressed on a given question, these views are real and potentially powerful and have to be taken into account by decision-makers.

The same dynamics operate at the level of institutions. A change in equity policy in a school or university, for example, may make the lives of some staff easier and those of others harder, and will often be supported or resisted on those grounds, not on its long term social impact. As Machiavelli noted centuries ago, those who feel threatened by a change will almost always be more vociferous than those who stand to benefit from it. This is what institutional resistance to change is about, and this is why it is often so hard to implement changes that seem highly sensible, such as prior learning assessment in tertiary education or inclusion of students with disabilities in schools.

Capacity is a very different problem, yet equally thorny. The history of education provides many examples of efforts to make changes that failed because people did not know what to do or how to do it (Fullan, 1991). Many of the reforms in teaching and learning in the 1960s and1970s were of this nature. We may want to empower parents or local communities, but not know how to do so effectively. We may want to give more attention to motivating students but lack effective techniques.

As more study has gone into the problem of implementation of change, especially on a large scale, the challenges have become steadily more apparent. People interpret new practices and policies from their own individual vantage points. Human practices have a great deal of inertia. People may feel they are doing the new practice when an external observer sees little change from what went before. In large systems, the investment required to increase the skills of all teachers, or even all managers, can be very

substantial (Cohen & Hill, 2001). For example, a recent external evaluation of the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in England (Earl et al., 2003) showed that even with a very large investment of people, time and money, teaching practice in many schools and classrooms had not changed very much.

These barriers are introduced not to create pessimism but to point out that improvement in our institutions requires much more than a discussion of policy options.

The role of money

Many debates about education reform turn substantially on money – how much more is needed and how much more is being provided. Despite some recent literature (e.g. Burtless, 1996), it is clear that money does matter. It is impossible to imagine a school system with no resources at all, and even the most determined critics of education spending do not suggest that industrialized countries should emulate the least developed countries and return to spending $100 per pupil per year. The debate is not really about whether money matters but rather about the marginal impact of money; about whether more (or how much more) would make a further noticeable difference.

Here the question is more complicated. There are good reasons – both empirical and theoretical – to believe that additional inputs of resources will produce diminishing marginal returns. That is, once a certain level of education is being provided, simply spending more generally is unlikely to lead to equivalent gains in outcomes. However money is never just spent, it is always spent on something in particular – buildings, salaries, equipment and so on. So the relevant question is what kinds of inputs are likely to produce the most value in terms of outcomes – the classic economic question of efficiency.

The question of how best to use resources is not asked frequently enough in education, where the discussion almost always turns on how much more is required and who will provide it. There are at least two levels of consideration to the optimal use of resources. One is within the scope of a given level of education or institution. For example, is it better to use more money to pay teachers higher salaries or to reduce class size or to buy more computers? These are important questions that have still not been adequately investigated, although evidence on some of them (such as class size) is now accumulating.

At a more basic level, the question is whether resources are best allocated to particular levels of education, or to education itself as opposed to other social purposes. For instance, currently in all countries per pupil spending is higher – sometimes much higher – in secondary and tertiary education than in early childhood or primary schooling. If the goal is to improve outcomes it might be better to shift resources from the former to the latter, where the lasting impacts appear to be greater. Even further, spending to improve maternal and baby health may be an even more cost-effective investment than early childhood education. Canadian evidence indicates that a child with fetal alcohol syndrome may create lifetime public costs of well over a million dollars, yet fetal alcohol is entirely preventable is pregnant women can be helped to avoid drinking. Rothstein (2002) has suggested that in the United States the best value in public policy would be in areas such as eliminating lead poisoning in children who live in dilapidated housing, or in raising the literacy levels of young women with young children.

It is important that a consideration of equity in education not jump to the conclusion that the necessary strategies all involve extensions of existing educational practices or even that they all lie within the education system itself.

A view of policy

Policy is often presented as a linear exercise, where a problem is defined and policies are the means of resolving, or at least addressing, that problem. While this view is important, it is too simple.

Government is a highly complex enterprise, in which actions are rarely simple and straightforward responses to particular problems or issues (Levin, 2001). Most of the time the policy process is full of tensions and contradictions (Dror, 1986). To mention just a few:

- problems may be dimly understood or poorly articulated, or there may be many different views as to what problems exist and require action;
- action may arise not from a clear understanding of a problem but from demands generated through the political process; there can be solutions without;
- even when problems are clear, the best solution may be unknown or a matter of considerable disagreement;
- it may take a considerable time – years – to recognize and name an issue, and then further years before there is enough interest or priority to address the issue;
- policies tend to have a range of results that are not predictable from their start because of changes in conditions and changes in the policies themselves as they are implemented.

Policy actions do not take place *ab nihilo*. All policies are embedded in a particular historical, social, political, and institutional context. As the various country reports done for OECD indicate, what is possible in any given situation depends a great deal on what has gone before. This is a prime reason that policies cannot simply be appropriated from one context for use in another.

Policy levers

Governments have a range of vehicles available for acting on any issue. These may be called 'policy levers'. A number of taxonomies of policy levers exist. However one commonly used set includes:

- legal vehicles such as legislation, regulation or government policy prescription;
- direct delivery of programs or services;
- provision of funding for programs or services of others;
- incentive mechanisms such as tax benefits;
- increasing public awareness through highlighting issues;

The decision as to which levers to use in a given situation depend on a range of factors including existing policies and structures as well as political commitments and beliefs. For example, funding programs delivered by others is only feasible if there already is some delivery capacity to build on. Or a government may be averse to provision of direct public services for ideological reasons.

Policy measures to support equity

In this section a taxonomy is outlined for thinking about the range of measures that countries can adopt in trying to improve equity. Policy measures can be considered as being directed at 3 goals: 1) encouraging individual participation, 2) changing the way institutions provide education, and 3) changing the broader social and economic conditions that affect participation and success. A variety of policy approaches, using the range of levers discussed earlier, is possible within each of these three main

strategies. As with any taxonomy, these categories are only a heuristic device; in practice they overlap and mingle.

Encouraging individual participation and success

1. Financial incentives. One way to support individuals in their educational efforts is to provide financial incentives of various kinds. The variety of financial supports in use in different countries is quite substantial. They can include direct subsidies to take part in education, various mixtures of grants and loans, tuition reductions or rebates, living allowances, incentives for employers to support the learning of their workers, and so on. Such incentives can be provided at the start of studies or linked to success so that completion of a program triggers some kind of benefit. Various forms of repayment of financial support also exist including regular loan payments and a range of measures linked to the tax system.

2. Non-financial incentives. Participation in education can be linked to access to other benefits. For example social assistance supports may be linked to participation in an education or training program. Students may be denied access to a drivers' license or other benefits if they are not enrolled in school.

3. Advertising and recruitment. In non-compulsory education some efforts to increase participation, particularly by target groups, involve various forms of recruitment. For example tertiary institutions or early childhood centers may make extra efforts to attract students from under-represented groups.

4. Support services. As awareness has increased that gains in equity require not just more participation in education but also more success, governments have increased the support services they provide to learners who appear to have additional needs. Such services can include guidance and counseling as well as a variety of academic preparation programs.

Changing institutional delivery systems and methods

1. Creating new delivery agents. In some countries, especially in the sectors that are less well developed, new delivery systems have been created. These can include new kinds of institutions, or new delivery vehicles based in existing institutions. Various forms of partnerships between public, non-profit and private sectors may be involved. In other cases control of educational programs or policies has been moved from national to local bodies or vice versa.

2. New programs. Existing institutions may be asked, required or encouraged to extend the range of programs they offer to reach new groups of learners.

3. New modes of delivery. In some cases existing programs and institutions are adequate but the mode of program delivery needs to change. Such changes might involve timing (e.g. part-time, modular), new locations such as delivery in workplaces or in remote communities, or delivery via independent study and distance learning that allow different students to participate.

4. New credentials. Institutions and countries may explore new credentials not only in newly developing fields (such as the social services), but in existing fields to meet changing needs. For example in some countries once a person reaches initial professional status, the only credentials available involve graduate study that may have a strong research or teaching, rather than practice, focus.

5. New modes of financing. Experimentation may occur or may be needed involving different modes of financing programs at the institutional level such as programs that are entirely user financed or support from employers or various forms of partnerships with learners, employers and governments. Government are also experimenting with various forms of funding to institutions that provide incentives to expand participation or increase success rates.

6. Changes in policies in areas such as admissions. Especially at the tertiary level institutions are experimenting with non-traditional admissions criteria, sometimes including prior learning recognition, that encourage new learners to take part in programs. Other instances included mature student status and preferential admissions for equity target groups.

7. Support services to increase completion rates. There is growing recognition in many areas of education that students who were previously thought to be incapable can in fact be successful with adequate support (Unruh & Levin, 1990). Institutions have used a wide variety of support mechanisms to provide the academic and personal supports that allow more learners to be successful.

Changes aimed at broader social phenomena

The following services or programs are not usually the responsibility of educational institutions or in many cases of the government departments responsible for education, so their development often requires an extended concept of lifelong learning.

1. Providing related services for learners. Learning success increases when learners have access to required supports such as adequate housing or, for adults, adequate child care.

2. Income support measures. Financial barriers to participation in learning are only partly a matter of tuition fees. Living costs and foregone earnings are a larger barrier and more difficult to address; the relationship between education and other social benefits programs is important. The financial support of employers is particularly important for workplace and adult learning.

3. Legal measures to reduce discrimination. Minorities who may be subject to general forms of discrimination in various societies find that such discrimination also hinders their ability to participate in education. For example some countries in Europe are struggling with measures to improve the education of Roma students but finding that general social discrimination is a large part of the problem and requires measures that go beyond education.

PART 2 - EQUITY STRATEGIES IN LIFELONG LEARNING

The second part of this document is an examination of the kinds of equity strategies that are being used in various countries as portrayed in the analytic work done by the OECD in recent years. The discussion is organized first around each of the four areas of policy focus – early childhood care and development (OECD 2001c); transitions from schooling into work (OECD 2000), the first years of tertiary education (OECD 1998), and adult learning (OECD 2003) as well as a brief discussion of some of the equity implications of PISA (OECD 2001b). Within each of these themes, both the overall OECD thematic report and a sample of country background reports and country notes are reviewed. In each area, the main equity issues in the work are reviewed, noting the policies that are being used to try to address them in relation to the taxonomy just presented.

Early childhood care and development

The thematic review on early childhood development gives attention to three main issues that have important equity dimensions. These issues are overall accessibility to services, affordability of services, and provision for particular high need groups.

Overall accessibility

The general issue of access to high quality care is a central focus of most policy work in ECD. Some countries have well developed systems at least for ages 3 and above, while in other countries the provision is much more limited.

Many countries have been working to increase the overall provision of early childhood services. The degree to which provision has been expanded has varied depending on the priority of the issue and the resources available. In Flemish Belgium as many as 85% of children age 3 and above are in regulated care. The Netherlands, despite considerable expansion in recent years, has quite limited provision for children under 3, though those 4 and above are partially provided for through the school system. However even after age 3, much of the care may be in schools and limited to the school day, which may impose additional costs and burdens on working parents.

While efforts to increase provision are common, countries have adopted quite different strategies in these efforts. In some cases, as in Britain, the emphasis has been on publicly supported services without charge or at very low cost to parents. In other countries, such as Norway, increasing provision has been financed to a considerable degree by fees. Decisions on which strategy to adopt are dependent on political commitments and fiscal capacity.

A second issue concerns the location and control of child care services. Some countries have quite centralized provision, sometimes by attaching child care largely to the education system. Many aspects of care may be regulated at the national level. Others make extensive use of a variety of non-profit organizations as the main service deliverers and are more inclined to allow greater local variation. In some countries individual families remain important providers as well, taking in local children either informally or under government regulation. These distinctions can have important equity implications – for example local organizations could be more concerned with particular equity issues in some cases and less concerned

in others. These relationships require more examination than has yet occurred, but it cannot be assumed that a decentralized approach will necessarily give more emphasis to equity.

A distinction must be made between child care at ages 3 to 5 and child care for infants and children under three. Almost everywhere provision is more available for children from 3 to the beginning of schooling than it is for younger children. By and large countries have 'built down' from their school systems rather than 'building up' from birth. From an equity standpoint, however, one must note the growing consensus that the first three years of life are especially important in laying a strong foundation for the future (Mustard, 2000; Karolyi et al., 1998). From a cost-benefit point of view it may be desirable to increase investment from conception to age 2 or 3, possibly even if these resources have to be found in other sectors, since the eventual return on expenditure will be higher. Of course one recognizes the political challenges in reallocating money from other educational sectors, all of which already feel themselves to be hard pressed to meet important needs.

Concern about participation in ECD is also slowly moving towards efforts to provide forms of ECD that may mitigate other disadvantages. In a few countries there is an effort to connect child care services to other related services such as health care or adult literacy. Canada's federal and provincial governments have agreed on a Children's Development Agenda that spans a wide variety of policy measures with particular attention to the highest need children and families. Some countries have tried to group all children's services under a single ministry; while appealing in some respects, service integration by age may have the perverse effect of creating barriers between services to children and to their families. On the other hand, several countries are trying to move more responsibility for services to children to municipal and local non-governmental groups in an attempt to ensure that services are responsive to local conditions rather than being dictated by central policies. Yet another consideration here is the balance between professional autonomy and parental and community participation. Countries may struggle with the extent to which control over services is moved from governmental or professional groups to local communities.

Affordability

Affordability of care is an important concern as in many countries child care, unlike primary education, does carry charges for parents. The direct costs of child care to families vary widely across countries, and in some countries vary substantially internally depending on the kind of care or the financial situation of the family. In some countries fees are linked to incomes, but as the thematic report notes, this linkage is often weak.

Even though governments generally provide the largest share of costs for child care, only a few countries have developed a widely accessible system of child care without significant charges to parents, and where this exists it is almost always for children aged 3 or more. However countries have increasingly recognized the problems of participation that are created if charges are too high. Several different strategies have been adopted to try to mitigate the impact of fees.

Some countries vary fees according to family income. For example Flemish Belgium has a complicated system of fees tied to parental income, with some families paying ten times as much as others. However linking fees to income is not always an easy strategy to implement since it requires either trust in parental declarations or a reporting and monitoring system that can be expensive to operate. Generally fees remain an important source of financing. For example, in Norway parents may pay as much as 20% of their income in child care costs.

Another strategy in some countries is to provide allowances, tax credits or other incentives to defray costs of child care to families. For example Norway has a family allowance system with additional payments for single parents – of which it has a relatively high proportion – and a further tax allowance

against child care costs. Much depends on the nature of such benefits. Family allowances are universal programs which may, in large part, flow to families where need levels are low. Tax credits, however, may only be of benefit to those who pay taxes which, in some countries, excludes a large proportion of the poor. It is possible to have refundable tax credits that can be claimed whether or not one pays tax, but these also depend on potential recipients knowing about them and filing claims for them, which the neediest groups may not do.

A third policy option is to finance child care through contributions by employers. Although this remains less common that the other strategies, the Netherlands is one country where employers provide a significant amount of funding for child care.

These arrangements may also differ by age of children. In the United Kingdom most care for those age 4 and above is at no direct cost to parents, whereas care for younger children is almost totally supported from fees.

Finally, it must be noted that one way in which child care is kept affordable in a number of countries is by the low salaries that are paid to workers in this sector, even though training requirements have been increasing steadily.

If adequate data were available, a more detailed analysis of all costs and revenue sources for child care across countries, taking into account the value of tax credits and other subsidies, could be a useful piece of work.

Care for target groups

Reports on child care from most countries expressed strong concern with ensuring appropriate services to children with higher levels of need, including those from low-income, immigrant, indigenous or other minority groups as well as children with disabilities. Although the concern for target groups is expressed in all country reports, it is given a lesser importance than the overall expansion of provision. The balance between the two needs may reflect the classic dilemma in social policy that while targeted programs are more efficient in terms of value for money, they carry a potential stigma for recipients, and political support is generally much stronger for universal programs.

Most countries recognize that families living in poverty are significantly less likely to participate in early childhood provision even though their children might benefit greatly. The scope of the challenge in this regard varies considerably, as illustrated in the thematic report (Figure 2.6, page 35). Norway, for example, reports only 4% of its children as living in poverty, whereas in the United States or United Kingdom the proportion is much larger – as high as 40% according to the UK country report. The thematic review also notes the prevalence in some countries of large numbers of single parents, primarily women, who face special challenges around child care and can be doubly disadvantaged because of low income levels.

Similarly, some countries have much higher proportions of minorities than do others, though the thematic review notes that the share of ethnic minority children is growing rapidly in several countries. Minority populations cannot be thought of as all having the same needs, either. There can be important differences between immigrants and indigenous populations. The latter groups may have a very different view of their place and a stronger desire to maintain their own culture and language at the same time as they improve their ability to participate fully in mainstream society. Ethnic communities also vary in the extent to which they face active discrimination. For example Roma populations in many countries are severely disadvantaged and may face active social segregation even though they have been resident in the country for generations.

The challenge of providing high quality care that is suitable to differing populations is considerable. The existing providers are often reluctant to change practices, while at the same time well established models of funding, organization, staff training and governance in some countries make it difficult to implement changes at the policy level.

In many cases the issues of access, affordability and targeting to high need populations are related, since services may be least available or least affordable for families with the greatest need. For example, parents with low levels of education or single parents or those who do not speak the majority language may be ineligible to receive child care because they are not participating in the labour force. Yet access to high quality care might improve the outcomes for children as well as assisting their parents in finding work or developing the education and skill needed for employment.

A further complication in the area of child care for high need populations is that one cannot focus only on the care of the child but must pay attention to the situation of the family. Even very good child care is not a substitute for a strong and supportive family environment. For children at risk family needs are rarely limited to child care, but often include low income, low levels of education, poor housing, and weak attachment to the labour force. A significant number of poor families are plagued by problems such as mental illness or drug abuse. Moreover, the same dynamics operate at the level of the neighbourhood. Data from PISA (OECD 2001b) and other sources (Thrupp, 1999) shows that neighbourhood characteristics can have an effect on children's outcomes independent of the child's own socioeconomic status. Thus effective child care strategies may require a broader service orientation, which sees the family and the local community as an important element in program design and delivery.

A number of specific provisions are noted in country reports for particular high need groups. Of course one strategy is to expand overall provision and keep it affordable. However participation in child care in some communities requires not just availability, but the knowledge and acceptance in the community that the services are affordable and appropriate. The Dutch Ministry of Social Welfare has invested significantly in intervention programming for these children and children 'at risk'. However, the Netherlands Background Report suggests that take-up for such programmes is still very low for children from ethnic groups, as is their participation in childcare- only 6-7% of Turkish and Moroccan parents in Rotterdam make use of childcare services. Thus specific communications strategies may be needed for target populations, including the use of native language materials and advocates within the target community.

Several countries have developed early childhood programs that are specifically targeted to high need groups, as in the Norwegian *barnehage*. Another example is the recruiting of child care staff from immigrant or poverty communities, as in Flemish Belgium and in the Czech Republic. The country reports and the thematic review describe some very interesting efforts. Another effort, already discussed, is to link child care more effectively to other related services. The problem is that the most interesting examples in both cases are often pilot projects with tenuous funding, or are dependent on the creativity and initiative of one or two key people. They do not seem to lead to broader changes in the overall system of provision.

Another policy mechanism that does have a broader impact involves eligibility criteria. In some cases access to child care is tied to labour market participation, but this requirement may be modified or waived for particular target groups such as ethnic minorities.

Countries are also considering how best to provide early childhood services for children with disabilities, the proportion of whom appears to be rising in many countries. There is a general belief that early provision of services such as speech therapy can mitigate later difficulties and so is cost effective. Many countries are trying to move away from segregated provision for special needs, though with very uneven results. The difficulties in moving towards integrated provision for disabled children illustrate the

gap between policy goals and the realities of provision given institutional histories, structures and attitudes as various institutional features make it difficult to reduce segregation. For example, in Flemish Belgium and the Netherlands the review team noted the strong tendency to have children designated into disability categories with consequent segregation even though in many cases the care afforded seems to be very good.

Related policy areas and services

Child care requirements and policies are inextricably connected to the overall economic situation and to other social policies. This is true for all three areas of policy concern – provision, affordability, and high need groups.

Where the labour market and employment are strong, and wages good, it is much easier for families to be able to finance child care. In areas of high unemployment or low wages parents may be unable to earn enough to make labour force participation a paying proposition. Social policies such as legal provisions for parental leave, child tax credits and other tax measures, and the employer role in supporting parents are also important. In the Czech Republic, for example, very strong entitlements to parental leave have led to the formal child care sector remaining quite small at least until children are age 4 or above.

In regard to serving target groups, the thematic report notes that in many countries social policy on taxes and benefits does not have a significant impact on reducing poverty levels. High poverty communities also face significant challenges in areas such as affordable housing and access to good health care, both of which are clearly related to good child development. Similarly, the needs of immigrant populations are related not only to child care but to opportunities to learn the majority language, and to access to good social support networks. Much work remains to be done to consider the broader policy issues around child development.

Conclusion

Early childhood development is clearly on the policy agenda of many countries, and in quite a few cases significant progress has been made in regard to broader accessibility. Because this is a developing sector there is more opportunity for innovation and different approaches to service delivery than may exist for schools. However the evidence reviewed suggests that the effort to expand care has not yet been adequately matched by efforts to serve the neediest populations even though the cost-benefit for such service might well be considerable. The wide variety of approaches to basic delivery and financing provide an opportunity to learn more about what policies are effective under what circumstances.

Despite the emphasis of the thematic review on equity in provision and a wide-ranging view of the needs of target groups, the information in country reports suggests are relatively narrow approach to child care. The emphasis is strongly on expanding overall provision, often at significant cost to families. Many countries are focusing on 3-5 year olds even though there is good reason to think that the benefits would be greater for provision for very young children. Finally, although there is concern about particular high need groups, the policy approaches here seem to be quite narrow and relatively unimaginative. A greater diversity in approaches to addressing high need populations would appear to be warranted.

PISA

Although the PISA study does not specifically examine countries' policy provisions around equity in schooling, it does provide some important lessons regarding equity in schools. PISA 2000 was an assessment of the skills of 15 year olds in 32 countries on a set of reading, mathematics and science tasks that are considered to be related to one's ability to function in the adult world as a lifelong learner.

Most importantly in regard to equity, the PISA data show that there is no necessary trade-off between quality and equity. Some countries, such as Korea, Japan and Finland, are able to sustain high levels of achievement and high levels of equity. Other countries have relatively low scores and also high levels of inequity. On the other, in many countries a substantial proportion of 15 year olds have skills that appear to be inadequate to successful adult life.

Among the main conclusions so far of the PISA analysis related to equity are the following:

- Home background (measured by parents' occupation, wealth and cultural capital) is a very strong predictor of educational outcomes.

- Being born outside the country of residence and not having the national language as one's first language are also linked to lower performance.

- The relationship between these variables in much stronger in some countries than in others.

- Higher levels of student engagement – the interest and active involvement of students in school work – is related to better outcomes. Indeed, engagement can substantially offset a poor family background.

- Overall performance appears to be higher, and variation among students narrower, in systems with a lesser degree of stratification between different types of schools. More integrated and flexible educational pathways, combined with a higher level of individual teacher support for students, appear to be conducive to better results, and a more balanced distribution of educational opportunities.

- Where there is a high degree of variation between schools, students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds tend to do worse. This, in turn, means that some of the *inequality of outcomes* is associated with *inequality of opportunity*.

- Students tend to perform better in schools characterised by high expectations, the enjoyment of learning, a strong disciplinary climate, and good teacher-student relations.

- Most of the high performing countries combine a clear focus on outcomes with greater degrees of freedom for schools to organise their learning environment and to manage their resources. Greater school autonomy is not necessarily associated with larger variation in performance between schools.

As a result of PISA there is growing discussion in a number of countries around measures that might be taken to improve overall results and to reduce gaps in achievement. In that regard PISA is an instructive example of the power of research and analysis to affect national and international policy agendas. The OECD might look at the particular features of PISA that seem to have given it a higher visibility and impact on policy than has occurred for the other thematic reviews.

Transitions from school to work

Transitions from school to work involve the intersection of three large, complex and largely independent sectors – schools, tertiary education and the labour market – with some role also for other areas of social policy, such as social assistance. The discussion of equity in transitions is complicated because the roles of the sectors overlap and interact in ways that make it difficult to be sure of where the

best impact points for effective policy are. All young people participate in transitions in some way or other, with greater or lesser efficacy.

Equity concerns focus first on the extent to which the system as a whole supports effective transitions for young people generally and second on those young people who appear to have the greatest difficulty in the transition process. The former focuses attention on general issues of social organization while the latter leads to attention to school leavers, youth with low skill levels, women, minorities and the disabled.

Factors outside the education system

In general it is recognized that while education plays an important role in the transition process, larger economic, social and demographic factors are even more important in shaping the experience of young people as they move into the labour market. As the thematic review put it,

> *The fundamental issue has been the extent to which the structural features of national transition systems either support and reinforce or work to counteract inequalities that are a function of social class and gender.*

Many of the country reports give considerable attention to the overall economic situation and its impact on youth employment. In some countries the employment situation for young people was quite good during the 1990s, while in other countries it deteriorated sharply. However almost everywhere relative wages for young people fell in the 1990s regardless of other economic conditions (OECD, 2000, p. 56).

Overall labour market conditions, while important, are not entirely predictive of youth conditions. Depending on demographics and institutional features, it is possible to have a strong overall labour market and serious problems for youth or to have a relatively good situation for youth in the face of overall labour market weaknesses. For example, youth with poor qualifications do very badly in terms of employment compared with adults in the Czech Republic but compare quite favourably in Greece and Turkey. The thematic review also notes that taxation policies can affect young people's choices in regard to post-secondary education and work (p. 76).

In addition to the macroeconomic situation, a range of other social policies may strongly affect the incentives and ability of young people to work or take additional training, or both. Although all countries have some form of active labour market policies, youth most in need of support may be ineligible to participate if they lack previous labour force attachment. Policies such as minimum wage laws can also be important in affecting employers' willingness to hire or train young people.

To take another example of an important influence on transitions from outside the education system, in countries experiencing the transition from Communism, many of the structures that had previously existed to support the transition to work were in the production sector. In many cases these have disappeared while at the same time the overall labour force has shrunk and the labour market as a whole has changed dramatically. For example in Hungary the labour force declined by nearly 20% between 1990 and 1998 (National Institute of Public Education, 2001) and at the same time the training programs that were associated with many large industrial complexes disappeared as these organizations were found to be uneconomic under the new rules and were themselves closed.

Youth experience in the labour market is also strongly affected by patterns of occupational credentialism that shape how easy or difficult it may be for young people to enter various occupations, regardless of the level of overall demand. Some countries have highly regulated labour markets in which certification is critical to most jobs, whereas in others the market is more open making particular educational pathways less critical to students' economic future. Insofar as the system of credentials does

not keep pace with the labour market itself, dislocations are created that may be particularly hard on young people. The relationship between the credentialing system and the education system is itself complex and quite variable across countries.

Finally, attention must be drawn to the important role of chance in shaping young people's lives. The reality is that the plans that most young people have at age 15 or 16 will not come to fruition, often for highly unpredictable reasons – parenthood, the wrong (or right) teacher, a change in family circumstances, illness, the offer of a job, and so on. Life course research shows that while outcomes for populations are highly predictable, outcomes for individuals are quite unpredictable. For some, many doors will open while for others, many doors will be closed. As Tepperman (1988) put it, life may be less a process of learning to get what you want than of learning to want what you can get.

Education system issues

Within the education sector, both secondary school and tertiary education are key elements of the transition to work. In both of these areas there are equity issues around participation and completion, but also around the specific ways in which provision is organized.

In all countries the completion of secondary school is increasingly a key to both the skills and qualifications that allow labour market success. Rates of secondary completion are generally quite high and rising, though for some countries increasing secondary completion remains an important task. Yet even in countries with high levels of secondary completion, there remain significant numbers of young people who drop out of school and whose labour force experience is almost always quite problematic. A major equity challenge is how best to reach this group of young people.

The reasons students drop out of secondary school are reasonably well known. Leaving school is rarely a result of academic difficulties alone. Personal factors in students' lives such as unexpected parenthood or lack of family income or substance abuse are important causes. However a sense of disaffection and disengagement from school is also a vital factor; strong engagement with and support from schools or other institutions can help students overcome very difficult personal circumstances.

Secondary completion and the equity considerations around transitions are also affected by the nature of secondary schooling, the different pathways that countries have available in their schools and the supports for school to work transitions. One contributor to disengagement or disaffection may lie in the way that in most countries secondary education is divided into several tracks – typically some that are vocational in orientation and others that are either more general or more academic. The ways in which these tracks are organized, the quality of teaching in the various programs, the age at which students are directed to one or another, and the ability of students to move from one track or pathway to another all raise equity concerns. However as the thematic review points out, it is possible to have successful transitions for most students even with vary different patterns of provision – for example comparing Japan with Austria.

The PISA study is helpful in reinforcing the importance of engagement as a key factor in student success. The results suggest that improving motivation is not simply a matter of the program structure, but has much to do with teaching methods, support services, and the extent to which students feel a personal connection with teachers and the school. A focus solely on the structure of secondary provision misses the opportunity to improve student outcomes by strengthening teaching and support practices in all tracks of secondary education.

Participation in tertiary education is another important factor in shaping transitions. Tertiary participation is increasing in almost all countries, and very rapidly in some. Equity issues around overall

participation in tertiary education are discussed more fully in the next section. In terms of equity in transitions to work, the importance of high levels of tertiary participation, especially if required for many jobs, depends critically on how available appropriate tertiary education is. For many students with weaker skills and motivation as well as fewer financial and other resources, requiring an extended period of formal education for many occupations may discourage them from trying.

In tertiary as in secondary education it is not only overall participation that matters but also how the provision is organized in terms of institutions, programs and supports. The balance and relationships between universities and other forms of tertiary education are important; a number of countries have tried to increase those parts of the tertiary system that are most closely linked to the labour market rather than simply expanding traditional university provision. Here again there are close connections to the ways in which useful labour market credentials are obtained. If control of credentials rests with occupational groups or with education providers there may be strong incentives to restrict accessibility.

High need groups

The greatest concern in the thematic work concerns what might be called low achievers – those either with weak skills or low motivation. The thematic review gives considerable attention to what is often called the 'high risk' group. Youth at risk should not be treated as a homogeneous group; specific subpopulations may have very different situations and needs.

Poorer secondary school completion rates are everywhere connected with socio-economic status. This connection is emphasized in some country report, such as Australia or Britain, but less so in the overall thematic review. Geography is occasionally noted as an equity issue; students living in more remote areas have more difficulty acquiring work experience and may have fewer occupational choices unless they relocate, which has many attendant costs. In some countries the difficult situation of certain minority groups is noted, but in others it is quite muted. Yet one cannot ignore the powerful disadvantages faced by some minority groups in every country, whether one is speaking of foreign workers in Germany, Afro-Caribbeans in Britain, Maori in New Zealand, or Roma in many European countries. The problem is clearly not simply one of educational provision but of deeply rooted social attitudes and practices throughout these societies.

Young people with disabilities are a small but important population who are not much discussed in the thematic document. The educational and occupational outcomes for persons with disabilities are well below national averages almost everywhere, and there are grounds for believing that this situation could be improved fairly easily, suggesting that more attention is merited in this area. Moreover, although integration of students with disabilities is a major focus of policy in early childhood and in elementary schooling, is it largely absent in discussions of secondary education and still quite muted in tertiary education.

Gender

Gender is an important issue in educational and labour market outcomes. As noted, it is paradoxical in that girls' and women's educational outcomes are now, in many countries, as good or better than those of boys and men. Yet many occupations, including the training programs leading to them, remain highly segregated by gender despite years of efforts to change this situation. Even more important, women remain significantly disadvantaged in the labour market in terms of occupational status and pay. Moreover, the thematic report notes that large differences in the outcomes of females and males are associated with poorer overall transition outcomes, suggesting that greater equity is not a zero sum game in which women benefit at the expense of men (p.48). These findings point again to the relative autonomy of

the labour market and to the limited ability of educational change to create concomitant labour market outcomes.

It should be noted that whatever the concerns, levels of inequality in most countries are significantly less in education than they are in the labour market. For example, in many countries girls and women now do very well in education, but their labour market performance in terms of job status and wages still lags behind men everywhere. Other minority groups may also be less disadvantaged in the educational system than in the labour market. For example, the situation of Aboriginal people in Canada has improved more rapidly in terms of schooling outcomes than in the labour market generally. The British country report makes a similar point with regard to several minority groups. In trying to improve labour market equity through education we may be asking the education system to do something beyond its powers.

Measures to improve equity

The thematic review, building on the background reports and other research and evidence, proposed a comprehensive approach to improving school to work transitions. Based on the country reports and the thematic review and using the taxonomy described earlier in this paper, countries appeared to be focusing on changing institutional provision as their main strategy in this area. Some of these efforts, such as increasing flexibility among pathways, are universal in scope while others are aimed primarily at target groups, especially youth who have not completed secondary education. The country reports contain fewer examples of incentives to individuals and broader social policy changes.

Encouraging individual participation and success

With the exception of tertiary participation, to be discussed in the next section of this paper, the thematic review materials do not give very much emphasis to measures aimed directly at individuals to increase their participation in transition processes. Some countries have used social marketing to encourage young people and adults with low levels of education to return to school. Of course the tremendous emphasis on the importance of education in all countries – the very interest that has led to the OECD's work on lifelong learning – reflects an environment in much of the world in which education is recognized, even by those whose participation and success are modest, as being vital to their futures. In general awareness of the importance of education is not the issue; access to appropriate services is.

One initiative in many countries related to individual participation involves efforts to improve guidance and counseling. In some cases financial supports for youth are being addressed by linking eligibility and payments such as social assistance to participation in approved education and training. Although not referenced in the thematic materials, there have been experiments in some places with both incentives for participation, such as paying students to attend or complete, and with punishments for non-completion, such as policies in some states of the United States to withhold drivers' licenses from young people who do not complete high school. There could be benefit in looking more carefully at these scattered efforts to determine their impact and in thinking more generally about the ways in which financial and non-financial incentives aimed at individuals might be used to increase participation and success.

Changing institutional provision

The thematic review identifies a wide range of changes in institutional provision in support of transitions. Some are aimed at changing basic institutional practices but many more are focused on programs aimed at particular target groups.

Among system-wide strategies a key goal is creating greater flexibility among pathways so as to accommodate better the inevitable changes in career and life plans of young people. In particular countries

with relatively rigid systems of tracking in secondary schooling are attempting to find ways to make it easier for students to move from one track to another. The thematic review recognizes that a high degree of vocational specificity with a high degree of stratification is "likely to support and reinforce a differentiation of transition outcomes by social class" (OECD 2000, p. 47). Research in several countries (for example Sweden, Canada, the United States) indicates that participation in vocational programs is not associated with better labour market outcomes, though the situation appears different in countries where vocational education is closely tied to systems of work certification such as apprenticeship. However existing pathways are so deeply embedded in national and institutional cultures that real and lasting changes are often very hard to make, and the degree of success countries have achieved in this area is still very much an open question.

Another strategy has been to take steps, discussed more fully in the thematic report, to strengthen preparation for work as part of secondary education. Not only are such measures seen to contribute directly to stronger transitions, they are often advocated as ways to increase the motivation and engagement of some students. On the other hand, participation in vocational programs at the secondary level has been declining in many countries as students and parents are convinced of the superiority of a general education. Rising levels of tertiary participation and the perception of rising skill demands in the labour market both contribute to the perceived importance of general secondary education. Ironically, efforts are being made to increase the relevance of secondary education to work at the same time as fewer and fewer students are moving directly from secondary education to work.

A less common strategy involves creating stronger bridges between secondary and tertiary education, and between formal education and various kinds of training. Efforts are widespread to increase the importance of various kinds of work experience in secondary schooling, though the impact of these initiatives is unclear. There is some evidence that such programs tend to fall short of their goals for a variety of reasons related to weak implementation and lack of fit with school cultures. In some cases the effort to introduce more work experience and work education may run counter to other policy efforts to increase the academic rigour of secondary schools. In principle, as the thematic review argues, the two goals can be combined but in practice their combination may present some real challenges in areas such as staffing and credentialing. Many countries are also reexamining their apprenticeship programs, though these have very different starting points since in some countries they have been a fundamental part of the transition process while in other cases they have been relatively unimportant.

Another important emphasis involves the review of credentialing arrangements to see where these could be simplified or integrated. Some countries have attempted very dramatic changes in this area, such as the national qualification efforts in Finland, New Zealand, Norway, or Portugal, but with quite mixed results. Changing national qualification systems turns out to be very difficult because of the multitude of interests already invested in current systems. More modest efforts include extending the use of prior learning recognition or allowing students to use credits or learning obtained in one system for credit in the other, thus supporting transitions and reducing time requirements for completion.

A fourth system-wide effort, already mentioned, is to improve guidance and counseling for students with the hope that this will help students make better choices. While widely advocated, it is not clear what impact this change will have since the value that young people place on these services may not be high. Young people may give much more importance to the views and experience of family and friends than they do to school guidance services.

The importance of increasing engagement and building student motivation has also been mentioned. However most of the efforts in this area appear to be directed through targeted programs for groups or individuals seen to be in need; significant efforts to change mainstream secondary provision to make it

more interesting and stimulating do not appear to be common. Indeed, in some countries the increasing emphasis on testing of students may have the opposite impact.

Target groups

Much of the focus in transition work lies in efforts to improve success among equity target groups. The system-wide interventions just mentioned are expected to benefit target groups as well. It could well be argued that the best strategy to address the needs of target groups is to improve mainstream provision and so reduce the number of students who are unsuccessful. Many countries also have or are developing specific programs targeted to at-risk young people. Most often these include a range of personal and social supports as well as education and training based on the realization that barriers to success are rarely just academic. Such programs may be offered in regular schools or in a wide variety of alternative settings. One problem is that these programs tend to be pilot projects or dependent on limited-term funding.

In some settings a variety of different providers are being involved in addressing youth transition needs. In countries such as Australia the tertiary sector, especially the non-university component, has been key. In other cases alternative secondary schools are created, operated by the regular school authorities but in different settings and with different instructional approaches. In another group of countries community providers such as youth groups and social service agencies have been given a greater role in delivering work-related programs, including education components, for youth. The Scandinavian countries appear to have well developed and integrated approaches using a variety of providers and working across policy areas.

Despite all the efforts, it is not clear that very much progress has been made in addressing the needs of target groups. The enduringly academic nature of secondary schooling in many countries, exacerbated by the pressure for students to qualify for tertiary study have been barriers to progress. As the thematic review notes, many countries also need better information and more research on the numbers and backgrounds of students who are not sufficiently successful.

Broader social policy

The challenges of lining up social policy provision across policy areas is huge. What seems like an obvious change from one perspective – for example, tying active labour market policies to educational strategies – can turn out to involve many unforeseen complications. The thematic review draws attention to the importance of policy coherence and a number of countries are working in this area.

Countries are trying to create incentives for individuals to complete their schooling through connections with the social welfare and training systems. For example, changes may be made in eligibility for social assistance to encourage youth participation in approved education and training. One of the most important actions involves changing the financial incentives that may discourage participation in transitions in areas such as student financial assistance or the link between social welfare payments and educational participation. For example, Australia developed a youth package in 1995 of training, work experience and counseling for persons under 25 who were receiving unemployment benefit, had not completed a vocational education program and who had been unemployed.

Still, when one considers the analysis of challenges and the key role that larger economic and social policy plays, efforts to think about transitions appear still to be too narrowly based in the formal education system and in add-on programs to that system. For example few efforts are reported to work with employers in a systematic way around equity employment.

Conclusion

Strengthening transitions to work is in some ways the most difficult of the lifelong learning policy challenges because it involves so many different sectors. At this point, awareness of the nature and extent of the problems is not matched by answers as to how to resolve them.

Tertiary Education

Huge increases in participation in tertiary education are surely one of the most dramatic changes in education around the world in the last few decades. Many OECD countries have set ambitious goals for the proportion of the population that should be involved in tertiary education. What was not so long ago an elite activity has now become something that is aspired to by a large proportion of young people – in some countries as many as 80% expect to participate in tertiary education. In the process of expansion new kinds of institutions have been created, the total number of institutions has been expanded, and existing institutions have been enlarged. The achievement is very substantial.

From the standpoint of equity this expansion has more recently run into two great difficulties. The first problem has been the pressure in many countries on public sector spending, which has in turn limited or reduced the funds available to tertiary education. Institutions have responded to these cuts in a variety of ways, ranging from significant reductions in programs and services to increases in tuition fees to much greater attention to revenue-generating activities whether in program delivery or in research. When funds are scarce institutional priorities are shifted to reduce costs or generate revenues, whether these tasks are closely related to institutional mission or not.

The second, more conceptual problem has been the tension between the press for mass participation in tertiary education and the view of many tertiary institutions that they should be as selective as possible in admitting students. Clearly if mass participation is intended, an emphasis on selection is going to be problematic. This tension is one of the reasons that some countries have developed new forms of tertiary education that are intended to be more open to wider participation. It has also led to more cross-border provision in a variety of institutions. However there appears to be an inexorable tendency in tertiary provision for institutions and programs to emulate those that are most prestigious, which are typically also most selective.

Against this background the OECD thematic work on the first years of tertiary education identified three key equity challenges, similar in many ways to those identified for early childhood development. These are:

- ensuring access to appropriate programs for all students who are motivated and can benefit;
- keeping tertiary education affordable;
- ensuring appropriate provision to learners in equity target groups – lower socio-economic communities, visible minorities, immigrants, non-majority language speakers, and persons with disabilities. The particular nature of equity challenges around gender requires separate consideration.

Ensuring accessibility

As noted, participation in tertiary education has increased rapidly in many countries. Several countries now have participation rates near or above 50% of the relevant age cohort, a situation that would have been unthinkable 50 years ago. However in many countries demand for tertiary education continues

to outstrip supply even in the aggregate, let alone in particular high demand programs or institutions. In addition to young people, many countries also have significant demand from adults who were unable in their own youth to take part in tertiary education but now wish to do so. (The demand for forms of tertiary education that are related to advanced study and workplace learning will be taken up in the next section of this paper on adult learning.) Moreover, there is a general conviction, whether well founded or not, that countries' economic success depends on ever-increasing tertiary participation so that the target level keeps getting higher.

As the thematic review notes, accessibility is not simply a matter of having some kind of place for every student who wants to attend. Participation is not enough; one is also looking for success, and there is increasing concern in many countries about large numbers of students who may begin but not complete tertiary studies. Non-completion may be the result of changes in students' life and career plans and may actually represent in some cases a positive step towards a preferred future. In many cases, though, it will be due to the lack of appropriate programs and supports in the tertiary institution. In either case, failure to complete can be costly both to individuals and to the state.

Another controversial and difficult issue around access concerns the mix of programs and credentials that will be provided. Despite a recognition in principle that tertiary education has much broader purposes than simply preparation for work, a great deal of policy emphasis has been on improving the match between provision and employment, something that has turned out to be very difficult to do. Students' interests may be only weakly linked to labour market opportunities, so that graduates are not well matched to job openings. Labour market demand can change swiftly and unpredictably, and many countries have experience with increasing numbers being trained in particular fields only to find out that by the time the students have finished, the projected jobs do not exist. In other cases intakes were reduced – as with nurses and physicians in Canada in the 1990s – only to have a significant shortage develop. Students also change their minds about what they wish to do. The dilemma is that although tertiary enrolments cannot and should not be derived directly from the labour market, the labour market must eventually absorb graduates. A reasonable degree of correspondence is presumably efficient and desirable but very hard to obtain. Too much focus on preparation for specific jobs is, ironically, likely to be self-defeating. Greater attention to the lifelong benefits of tertiary education with ongoing adjustment by learners and employers is likely a better approach.

Affordability

During the period of tertiary expansion countries went through considerable change in their financing of tertiary education, and particularly in the direct costs to students. In some countries direct payment of tuition by students has always been a feature of tertiary education. In these situations for the most part tuition fees increased substantially in the 1980s and 1990s as institutions struggled with static or declining levels of financial support from governments. Where tertiary education traditionally did not carry any tuition payments, serious political struggles have occurred – and still continue - in some countries over efforts to introduce tuition fees. On the whole the cost of tertiary education for students has increased, and substantially so in some countries.

At one time tuition was widely seen as the primary barrier to participation in tertiary education for students from poorer backgrounds. However as both research and experience accumulated, it became clear that tuition was not the only factor and perhaps not even the most important. A considerable body of evidence shows that tuition fees are only one part of the financial calculus around tertiary participation, and that financial issues are not necessarily uppermost in shaping students' choices in any case.

In terms of costs of tertiary attendance, indirect costs such as the cost of living and foregone wages are, in most cases, much larger than tuition fees. The critical question for potential students is not so much

whether they can pay the fees, but whether they can cover all the costs of tertiary attendance for the entire length of the program. These decisions are dependent not only on the level of fees, but on all the resources students can muster from all sources. While economists often assess these costs against later returns in the form of higher wages, students can only make rough estimates of these future returns while being uncomfortably aware that returns can change sharply and suddenly due to changes in the economy.

In this picture the variety of financial supports that governments may provide play a critical role. The possible mix of instruments is discussed a little later. The net impact of changes in financing provisions takes years to work its way through the system, so that adjustments in light of changing circumstances are often very slow in coming. However during the 1990s it did become evident in countries where both costs and access to loans had risen that some students were finishing their tertiary studies with substantial debt.

Economists have argued over the degree to which private borrowing to pay for tertiary education is actually a sound investment for an individual. This debate is unresolved. While there are clearly considerable private returns to tertiary education in many countries, the picture is quite variable as returns depend on macroeconomic conditions, demographics and participation rates. Returns to education also depend partly on scarcity, so if everyone invests, everyone's return on the investment may be diminished. For the considerable number of students who do not complete their studies, the investment is much less likely to be productive, though even here one must take into account the many reasons why individuals do not complete a program some of which are themselves the product of a calculation of costs and returns. With all the reservations, for individuals in many situations participation in tertiary education appears to be a sound decision.

Situation of target equity groups

Even with enormous expansion of places in tertiary education, problems of equal access for various social groups have not been resolved. The thematic report notes that "[d]espite the best endeavours, research studies indicate that deep-seated equity problems continue: there is disproportionately small participation by lower socio-economic groups in all countries;" 32

Even if all financial barriers were resolved, it is still likely that tertiary participation would be slanted towards more advantaged social groups because non-financial barriers are also vital determinants of tertiary participation and success. Over the last two or three decades we have learned a great deal about the factors that prevent and promote tertiary participation and success. Financial barriers have already been discussed. The non-financial barriers have been described by Tinto (1993) as dispositional, situational and systemic. Dispositional barriers have to do with potential learners' motivation and sense of efficacy. Some students may have very little sense of what tertiary education is about and very few role models to draw on. They may have had considerable difficulty at secondary school so have low self-confidence as learners. Under these circumstances learners may also be less inclined to incur debt to finance their tertiary studies because they have less confidence of successful completion.

Situational barriers have to do with students' living situation. For example tertiary attendance may be considerably more difficult if students have young children, or do not live close to a tertiary institution, or have to be employed part-time to finance their studies. These barriers are not caused by the tertiary system but steps can be taken to reduce their impact on participation by providing appropriate programs and services.

Systemic barriers lie in the tertiary institutions themselves. A wide range of institutional practices can discourage participation – for example poor access to information about programs, lack of access to or attention from instructors, difficult timetabling provisions, requirements for full time study, unfair admission rules, or other institutional policies that provide little flexibility to accommodate students'

diverse situations. Even more fundamentally, as the thematic review notes, " The question still remains as to whether tertiary teachers and institutions uniformly and consistently see successfully learning students in study programmes of high quality, interest and perceptible relevance as a fundamental objective." 68. In other words, some tertiary institutions or staff members may see the failure of many students as an indication of the high standards in their program.

It should be noted again here that inequalities in the tertiary education sector are probably smaller than they are in the labour market and society generally, so it is not reasonable to place the main responsibility for employment equity on the education system. As in the other areas of education, addressing equity in tertiary participation will require more comprehensive and co-ordinated policies in areas such as health, housing, and employment. Additionally, efforts will be needed in target groups both to work with younger students to build their interest and to provide opportunities for adults who wish to return to education.

Gender

The situation of women in tertiary education is quite different from other target groups. Women now make up a majority, and sometimes a substantial majority of the tertiary student population in many countries. They are increasing their share in graduate and professional programs also. However there are still issues facing women in several areas, including low participation in some programs (such as engineering) and in some cases the limited consideration for some barriers such as requirements for child care.

Broader social policy issues

Tertiary participation is also affected by many other social policy issues. The overall state of the economy and labour market are important not only in shaping demand for skilled workers but also in influencing students' perceptions of the value of tertiary education. As the labour market is seen to become more uncertain and more competitive, students are more likely to seek higher levels of education and qualification to protect themselves. These perceptions can, of course, be rather distant from the reality of the labour market that is itself subject to quite sudden changes.

For target groups access to tertiary education is also shaped in substantial ways by their overall social situation. A U S study (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996) showed how initial disadvantage through poverty and ethnicity had lifelong effects because the disadvantaged attended lower quality schools, had less access to support services, had less income to support tertiary attendance, had less access to well paying jobs as students, had more difficulties securing adequate housing, and faced continuing discrimination in the labour market not only during but after their education. Even with similar levels of advanced education, some minorities appear to face discrimination in the labour market that reduces the value of their additional study.

Policy measures

Although this section is built around the three categories of individual participation, institutional provision, and broader social policy, in tertiary education the first two categories are largely conflated. Tertiary institutions tend to have a substantial degree of autonomy from the state, so government policy often seeks to influence institutional practice through the creation of incentives or by direct appeals to learners. For example, a government may link funding to enrolment targets for institutions. The institutions are then responsible for taking the necessary measures to reach the targets even though the general policy has been set by government.

Changing individual participation

Because tertiary attendance is a voluntary decision made by learners, many of the measures to increase participation have been directed to individuals. Several countries have set numeric targets for increased enrolments and have used social marketing to convince more people to participate in tertiary studies. Tertiary institutions have also been involved in active recruitment of students, sometimes because governments have given them enrolment targets to meet or financial incentives for increasing enrolment. In other cases institutions market themselves because the marginal revenue from additional tuition can be greater than the marginal cost of adding a student. (Though few institutions actually calculate carefully the true financial impact of increased enrolment.)

Recruitment of students has in many countries focused primarily on youth; the usual measure of participation is as a ratio of the youth population. Less attention seems to have been paid to participation by the large number of adults in most countries who may have an interest in and capacity for tertiary education.

Policy measures around affordability have moved in quite contrary directions. As noted, quite a few countries have actually increased, sometimes very substantially, the cost of tertiary education even while trying to increase enrolments. Cost increases have involved tuition payments where none previously existed (as in Britain), substantial increases in tuition (as in Canada or the United States), or reductions in living and other supports (as in some of the transition countries of east-central Europe).

At the same time, other measures have been put in place, sometimes in the same countries, to make tertiary study more affordable. Some countries provide a statutory system of grants for all tertiary students. Some countries have increased incentives for study by allowing deduction of costs from taxation, either for students or their parents. In other cases, and to an increasing degree, governments provide loan programs for students who require them. These programs vary widely in terms of the amount that may be borrowed and the terms of repayment. In a few settings, such as Australia, repayment is linked to income, which can put the program halfway between a loan and a tax. Some measures may be generally available to all students while others may be targeted to students in particular high demand occupations or under specific conditions such as an agreement to work in a high need geographic area. As concerns have risen in some countries about the impact of debt, ameliorative measures have been put in place such as more support to students who are having difficulty repaying their loans. Although the range of measures is wide, evidence on their relative effectiveness is scarce.

In the midst of this welter of measures, attendance has continued to increase almost everywhere, reinforcing the view that costs are not the only determinant of participation.

Changing institutional provision

Many different changes in provision have also been tried in making tertiary education more accessible to more people. Naturally, an enormous expansion of participation requires an equivalent expansion in institutional capacity. Many countries have created new institutions or expanded existing institutions substantially or both. The difficulties in this effort are considerable, involving not only significant financial challenges around both operating and capital costs, but also problems of human capacity, such as having enough qualified instructors. Countries also vary greatly in the role accorded to the private sector in tertiary education, which ranges from negligible in some cases to very substantial in others. The relationship between private provision and equity has not been explored to any substantial degree, but will likely depend on the specifics in each country.

Countries have not only been expanding their tertiary provision but also diversifying it. In some countries, such as Britain or Australia, where tertiary education was dominated by universities, efforts have been made to introduce more short cycle programs and to create institutions that have a more applied focus with closer links to employment. In other countries, where education was already dominated by short-cycle, work-related programs the effort has been in the opposite direction – to strengthen universities and have more students in longer-cycle programs programs and general education to avoid having a population whose training is too narrow and subject to obsolescence. Inevitably, however, institutions develop their own agenda that is not necessarily consistent with the intentions of policy-makers. In particular, as already noted, institutions tend to pursue the goals of increasing their status (perhaps by becoming more selective), and increasing their size and range of programs.

At the sub-institutional level, efforts have been made to alter the mix of programs available. In many countries the growing number of tertiary graduates has led to demand for more graduate and advanced programs, an issue taken up in the next section on adult learning. Students 'vote with their feet', choosing fields of study that they see either as more meaningful or more likely to lead to secure employment. Many countries have seen significant shifts in enrolments across programs, such as the enormous recent interest in studies in business and management, often at the expense of the humanities. As noted earlier, students' choices may be only weakly connected to the realities of the labour market, especially given the time lag between choosing a program and completing it, by which time economic circumstances may have changed dramatically.

Information technology has been seen as an important means for the extension of tertiary education to new audiences, especially those who for reasons of time or distance cannot attend regular programs. However despite very substantial investment in ICT, there is not yet much evidence of its effectiveness. Distance education has been widely advocated and adopted in many countries, but evidence is lacking on the extent to which these programs redress inequities in tertiary provision beyond those due primarily to geography.

In the area of teaching and learning there appear to have been fewer measures. Tertiary teaching remains by and large quite traditional. Changes in student assessment are also hard to introduce, making it more difficult to improve the assessment of prior learning. Even simple changes such as expanding part-time study continue to be resisted in many institutions. The tension was noted earlier between the desire to expand participation and the belief that high rates of failure are a sign of high standards so that mass success must inevitably mean lower quality.

Some tertiary institutions have made efforts to improve their support services to students. One area of support involves efforts to increase student identification with the institution, which is related to retention. Measures such as peer advisors or tutors, student support groups, and improved orientation fall into this category. Institutions and governments have also in some cases made efforts to strengthen services in related areas such as health, housing, and counseling.

Expansion of tertiary education has also had an impact on secondary schools, sometimes in ways that are contradictory to other policy agendas. As the proportion of students going on to tertiary education increases the tendency of secondary schools to focus on tertiary preparation is increasing even as other efforts mount to broaden the scope of secondary education and pay more attention to students who are disaffected, as noted in the previous section. Extensive recruitment of students by tertiary institutions, sometimes to meet enrolment targets set elsewhere, may exacerbate these trends.

Target Groups

Efforts to increase participation of target groups are being made both by governments and by institutions and have, to varying extents, addressed dispositional, situational and systemic barriers.

In a few cases governments have put pressure on institutions to improve their equity performance. For example the British government has made very public declarations and published performance data to put pressure on institutions to admit more students from lower income families. Preferential admissions for equity groups remains, at least in some cases, controversial. In the United States affirmative action policies are less prominent today than a decade or so ago due to political opposition. However alternative vehicles to support minority enrolments, such as guaranteed admissions for the top students at every high school, have been put in place in some states. Canada and New Zealand, on the other hand, are examples of countries that have increased the number of initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining students from indigenous peoples.

Many institutions are increasingly developing programs aimed at minority students. Institutions may actively recruit students from designated groups and in some cases are also making serious efforts to hire more faculty and staff from these groups. Women's studies and various ethnic studies are now well established in many – but not all - countries. So are support mechanisms directed to specific target groups such as dedicated student organizations, meeting areas or support staff. Institutions may offer programs in different locations or formats as a way of reaching some target group students. In some situations separate institutions have been created to serve target groups, such as dedicated aboriginal institutions in Canada and New Zealand.

Despite all these measures, much of the focus remains on improving the ability of students from target groups to adapt to tertiary education as it exists. There are fewer efforts to try to change tertiary provision to address the needs of students from target groups. Moreover, the true extent and impact of these efforts remains unknown. Additional study is needed of the extent, nature and impact of measures to improve target group participation and success.

Adult Learning

Adult learning is the most difficult part of the lifelong learning continuum to discuss because it is so diverse and so amorphous. The boundaries of adult learning have been expanding steadily under the influence of the idea of lifelong learning. An enormous range of programs and services fits under this general heading, ranging from long-term education programs linked to advanced credentials to short-term, on-the-job training linked to a specific work skill. Some elements of the adult learning world are relatively straightforward, such as efforts to provide further education for adults who did not complete secondary education, or adult access to tertiary education. Other areas, such as education in the workplace or the continuing education of professionals, are still developing and, because they are so various, are harder to put boundaries around. The danger must be noted of putting too much of the focus of adult learning on narrowly-defined economic purposes at the expense of other important goals such as capacity to participate in civic and social life or, for older adults, the role of education in retaining intellectual and physical vitality.

Differences in provision and approach among countries are also stronger in adult education than in other areas. Because these systems are less developed there has been less opportunity for 'institutional isomorphism' to develop. The background reports and country notes reveal clearly how much provision rests on each country's particular history, culture and institutional structures. In some countries, such as Canada, the formal system is central to adult education while in other countries, such as Norway, local and community groups play a much stronger role. In countries such as Spain or Denmark agreements between

trade unions and employers are central while in Britain they play a minor role. Many other kinds of differences could be cited, such as the role of labour law and basic attitudes towards literacy and education.

These differences are important in a number of ways. Where adult learning is provided largely by tertiary institutions or private providers it is likely to involve higher costs to learners. Workplace learning likely to be far more developed where it is supported by collective agreements or national working conditions provisions. If credentialing arrangements make it difficult to organize provision for adults or if tax provisions are not supportive, participation is likely to be lower.

As the thematic review points out, much of the effort required in adult education involves creating a system out of what are now largely disparate parts. Moreover, the general view is that overall provision for adult learning is inadequate in most areas. There are simply not enough opportunities for adults to pursue recognized learning whether in basic education or workplace skills or advanced professional education. Even the countries that have most fully developed an approach to adult learning still have many gaps and inadequacies in their services. As the thematic review notes, this is to be expected given the recent development of the whole idea of lifelong learning, and many countries are taking active steps to improve the situation. However equity issues may remain rather hidden in this situation.

A further important distinction between adult education and other areas of learning is the critical role of employers. The majority of adult learning occurs in relation to work – either to improve one's skills in a current job or to qualify for better work. The requirements and habits of employers are therefore vital considerations. Because most adults are already working, their ability to engage in learning also depends greatly on the support of employers. In tertiary education much of the effect of government policy operates through partly autonomous institutions. In adult education much of what governments do will be aimed at employers, who are substantially more autonomous than are tertiary providers.

Employers' response to demands to increase training will be shaped by their sense of the potential return on this investment and by the practicalities of the workplace. As the thematic review notes, not all employers are convinced that more investment in learning will in fact improve their prosperity, and in at least some cases their doubts may be well founded. Where employee turnover is high – perhaps because of low wages - employers may not see the point of investing in education even though these employees are likely to be less well prepared in the first place.

A particular concern in the area of workplace learning is the extent to which workplaces actually utilize the skills of their employees. As the IALS study showed, skills require exercise to remain fresh. Yet a considerable body of evidence from several countries (e.g. Livingstone, 1999) shows that a considerable number of employees regard themselves as being overskilled for their jobs or being in jobs in which they are unable to use the skills they have. The rhetoric about high skill environments and employers' commitments to learning is not necessarily matched by the reality. The social organization of work may make it very difficult for new skills to be used regardless of their value (Osberg et al., 1995). More broadly, there is considerable dispute about whether the demand in the labour market for enhanced skills is not already matched or even more than matched by increases in the supply. Levels of educational attainment may be rising more quickly than labour market demand. Further assessment of skill take-up in workplaces would seem an important research issue before any assumption is made that further massive skill increases are indeed required across the labour force.

The available evidence on adult learning indicates that there are two key areas of concern in regard to equity – the large number of adults with low levels of formal education and the strong tendency for participants in adult learning to be people who already have relatively strong educational backgrounds.

First, a substantial number of adults in many countries lack the formal education and skill to participate effectively in the society and economy (including in many cases capacity in the majority or national language). In every setting, those with less formal education are less successful on average in the economy; the differences in outcomes for adults without secondary school completion vs. those with tertiary education are very substantial everywhere. Probabilities, however, are only that. The population of those with less formal education is itself heterogeneous and ranges from persons who are highly successful – every country has its stories of school dropouts who became millionaires – to persons who cope adequately to another group of people who are substantially excluded from the labour market and, to greater or lesser degree, from full participation in the society as a whole.

The lack of formal education is disproportionately higher among older people, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those in rural areas and some ethnic minority groups. The impact of socio-economic status has been discussed earlier; it need only be said here that disadvantage continues to operate throughout the life course, often in a cumulative way. Mention must be made specifically of the difficulties facing many minority groups. Indigenous populations in a number of countries were for many years denied access to reasonable education with dire long-term results. Other minorities may face discrimination in the school system or may have faced significant language difficulties or may place less emphasis on formal education. The result is that adult education efforts need to be particularly sensitive to minority concerns.

The track record of adult basic education and training in many countries is not at all positive. Evaluations show low completion rates and a considerable amount of 'churn' – the same people returning to programs repeatedly without enough success to move on to work or further education. Ideas exist as to how adult basic education could be improved. One possibility is to create stronger connections to specific occupations or programs – for example by guaranteed employment or admission to a further program for successful completers - so that the materials are more closely linked to personal goals. However other changes in curriculum and pedagogy may also be needed

The second major equity issue, in almost every area of adult education and in all countries, is that participation is skewed towards those who are already more educated. By definition, workplace education can only take place where there is a workplace. Regions with high unemployment or less developed economies will typically have less access to adult learning. Small firms are less likely to provide training and education opportunities, so areas where the economy lacks large employers will also tend to have fewer learning opportunities for adults. As the thematic review shows, workplace education opportunities are disproportionately available to those with more formal education, which will tend to make inequalities worse. Older workers may get less opportunity for learning at work. In many countries the same is true of workers with lower skill levels or workers in occupations such as manufacturing. Target equity groups are particularly disadvantaged in that they may face both these problems – lack of access to basic skills and less access to learning in the workplace. Women, on the other hand, tend to be disproportionately active in all areas of adult learning.

Although the material in the thematic review gives prominence to identifying these issues, the focus of the thematic report and the background documents is, understandably, much more on the development of overall policies and structures than on how best to address equity concerns. The organizational framework of the policy taxonomy – individual participation, institutional responsiveness and broader policy – provides a reasonable way to capture the issues and potential solutions.

Enhancing individual participation

The thematic review gives considerable attention to the need to motivate adults to participate in learning. In some countries or sectors, adults may be unwilling to admit their need for further education or

they may find the thought of returning to studies a daunting one. Social marketing efforts such as advertising campaigns to encourage further learning are attractive because they are easy to do, visible, and do not incur ongoing resource commitments. Whether they are useful is quite another matter. Although participation rates in formal learning remain modest, studies of nonformal learning (Livingstone, 1999) show very high participation rates and surveys of public opinion seem to indicate that most adults, even those who do not participate, are convinced of the importance of ongoing learning. Barriers that prevent participation appear to be more important than lack of interest in learning.

The single most important barrier appears to be financial. Many of the same considerations outlined in regard to tertiary education also apply here. Both direct and indirect costs are important. Tuition may be an important barrier to some learners, especially those whose labour force conditions are currently worst – for example workers earning low salaries with considerable job insecurity who must work full time or more to survive. They are most in need yet are likely to have the least disposable income to pay. Where adult training has a large private sector or where public providers are required to operate on a full cost recovery basis, costs are likely to be considerable. Aversion to debt may also be an issue among the most needy adults, whose time horizon for recovering their investment is less than it is for young people.

In many cases indirect financial considerations are just as important. Full-time study is often impossible for adults who have to earn incomes and support families. Programs offered to suit working adults, in evenings or on weekends, may generate quite substantial costs for child care. Transportation costs can be an obstacle especially for people who are at some distance from the education provider.

Countries have recognized the problems of financing and tried to address them in a variety of ways. In most countries adult basic education is heavily subsidized or provided free of charge. Basic education programs may include a variety of other supports to learners. Where tied to active labour market programs, for example, they may include payment of living costs and support for indirect costs such as transport or child care. However in most countries there are fewer places available for basic education than there is demand and sometimes the imbalance is very large.

The range of other financial measures is quite substantial. Some countries, such as Finland, provide supports to individuals through tax incentives. More recently several countries have experimented with some form of individual savings incentive for learning, sometimes called individual learning accounts. These were discussed in some detail at the OECD Seminar on Financing Lifelong Learning in Ottawa, Canada (OECD, 2002). The conclusion seemed to be that although they had potential in some respects, such programs would not resolve the problems of finance especially for learners who are less educated, earn less and are more cautious about engaging in learning.

Another set of public subsidies goes to learning providers and employers. The latter can deduct from taxes all training costs or in some cases get grants or additional tax incentives for training. Learning providers, whether in the public or private sector, may be subsidized directly to provide education for particular groups or indirectly through the student financial assistance system, which may largely offset high tuition costs for students. (In some countries, such as Canada, where failure and loan default rates are high for some very high cost private programs, there is now discussion of whether this kind of subsidy is sound public policy.) Yet another form of encouragement to employers is through public recognition programs that provide a quality designation to a company, such as Investors in People in Britain.

Some jurisdictions have used various forms of training taxes of levies to encourage learning in workplaces. An alternative to universal levies has been to encourage or bring together employers in an industry to provide learning on a collaborative as well as individual basis. Canada is one country that has made substantial use of sector councils. However given the nature of workplace learning, these efforts may have little positive impact on equity of access to training.

Among non-financial barriers time is the single most important. In some senses time has been equated with money, so that tax incentives or other financial inducements are thought to increase individual willingness to commit time to learning. This is another area where employer commitment is vital, so that individuals can manage to add learning to their work even though many feel that work demands are already intensifying steadily and threatening the balance between work and other parts of life. One vehicle used in some countries in regard to time is the provision of guaranteed educational leave through national or local collective agreements. The details of such plans are critical and can vary quite a bit, but where they exist, as in Norway, they are clearly linked to participation in adult learning. Portugal has also recently implemented such as plan with the goal of providing an annual learning or training entitlement for at least 10% of all workers. Again it will be important to pay explicit attention to the equity impacts of these policies.

Recognition of non-formal and prior learning is another policy intended to provide incentives for adult learning. Some mention has already been made of this strategy earlier in this report. A number of countries, such as Finland, Norway and Portugal, are experimenting with quite ambitious schemes to support the recognition of learning. Others, such as Canada and Britain are proceeding more cautiously. Learning recognition is a very important measure but one that faces many challenges to become an effective reality.

Finally, some policy measures seek to improve guidance and counseling for adults as a way of encouraging learning. It seems likely that making it easier for adults to get good assessments of their current skills and assistance in sorting out the vast range of occupational and learning options would be useful provided that these services are of high quality and are such that adults want to use them. Guidance services must work hard to avoid underestimating the potential of adults given evidence (Unruh & Levin, 1990) that persons with low levels of education are capable, with the right supports, of completing very challenging programs of study. Some countries are using community and non-profit organizations as important elements in providing guidance and support to adults, especially those with low skills. However it is also important to link support to the achievement of recognized credentials that have labour market currency. Not enough is known about the current state of this area to say more at this point.

Changing institutional provision

A wide variety of measures under almost all categories in the taxonomy have been adopted by governments, employers, institutions and other providers to try to accommodate adult learners. The unstructured nature of the field has allowed, even encouraged, many different approaches.

The range of agents involved in adult learning has been broadened. In some cases existing adult education providers have been given greater responsibilities. In others, special purpose adult education institutions have been created. In supporting basic education, some countries have chosen to work extensively with the formal education system – both secondary and tertiary – while others have put more emphasis on working with community and non-profit organizations. Private sector providers also play a growing role in some settings. In terms of employers, efforts have also been made to organize provision through employer groups or sector bodies.

The thematic review materials provide only some glimpses of the range of programs being offered in adult and workplace education. These range from basic literacy and numeracy to advanced technical and social skills at the postgraduate level, and just about everything in between. The open nature of adult learning and its newly developing character have prompted many providers to experiment with a range of program offerings.

Changes in program offerings are matched by changes in modes of delivery. The importance of scheduling programs in evenings and weekends when working adults can attend is one simple example. Another is the provision of programs directly in workplaces, usually in cooperation with employers who may provide indirect support in the form of facilities or working time to participate. A number of the background reports and country notes in the thematic review make note of the importance of modularizing programs for adults to allow people to participate and make progress as they have time without having to start anew repeatedly. While examples of modularization, such as in Switzerland, are given in the documents, the extent to which this change is taking place remains unknown.

Communication technologies are having perhaps their widest application in the area of adult learning. Various forms of independent study and distance education seem especially appropriate for adults who have to fit learning around other commitments. The world wide web is being widely used as a delivery agent using a variety of different software mechanisms. However the jury is out on how successful the web will be overall as well as its effects on equity of provision. For each well publicized success there appear to be a significant number of other efforts that prove unsuccessful. Many providers have discovered that offering programs on the web can be expensive and does not necessarily generate the expected enrolments. Perhaps more promise lies in mixed delivery approaches that combine elements of in-person programming with other aspects of independent study and remote access to instructor support or other learners. Much more remains to be learned about the role of ICTs in supporting adult learning, especially in light of very unequal access to technology and the 'digital divide'. However there is some evidence that computer-assisted instruction works well with adults in basic education because it offers more control over content and pacing and a less public venue for students who lack self-confidence.

Adult learning also opens new frontiers around the credentialing of learning. The importance of prior learning assessment and the efforts of some countries to change their qualifications systems and the difficulties in doing so have been mentioned earlier. However if a whole new field of learning is to emerge it would seem that new forms of credentials may be appropriate. In adult basic education existing programs may offer only a basic skills credential that is of little practical value beyond qualifying for admission to tertiary education. It may be useful to consider intermediate qualifications that fall in between secondary school completion and advanced skills as a way of bridging low-skill adults into both work and further education – for example a qualification in education or in health care that qualifies for paraprofessional work and is fully integrated into a complete qualification for those wanting to continue their education. Another possibility lies in the interest in employability skills – generic skills that learners could demonstrate, including through prior learning assessment and portfolios, that might be widely acceptable to employers as an alternative to secondary school graduation.

In the workplace the potential range of credentials is essentially unlimited. The development of credentials by information technology companies such as Novell, Oracle and Microsoft provides an interesting example of private companies organizing a credential that is widely sought and widely accepted, completely outside the existing educational and credentialing system and therefore in some ways more open to members of target groups if the financing can be found. Some of the thematic review material notes the preference of employers to provide training that is not linked to credentials as a way to avoid the problem of free riding by other employers. However from a public policy point of view it must be much preferable to have skills recognized as much as possible to allow efficiency in the allocation of skilled labour.

Finally, some efforts are being made to increase completion rates in adult learning programs which appear, in many cases, to be quite low (though evidence on this important point is very limited). Various kinds of support services can be important. For adults with low skills and lack of self-confidence, academic supports may be important. For others, a return to education may put stresses on family life and relationships and create a need for personal supports. Adults often need assistance as well in coping with

the administrative demands of large institutions and credentialing systems that may primarily be oriented to young people.

Conclusion

The growing attention to adult learning, both for low skill adults and in the workplace is certainly a positive development, as are the innovations being attempted at the national, institutional and workplace level in providing for adults. Countries are grappling seriously with the policy challenges around a whole new field of learning and making efforts to address it in a holistic and integrated way.

Despite these positive developments, the discussion above may overstate the degree of innovation and success in the system. As the Spanish report notes, participation rates in many countries, at least in formal learning, remain relatively low. Many low-skill adults do not have access to appropriate programs even if they are motivated. Countries are still investing vastly more public money in their formal education systems than they are in adult learning, which is largely seen as something to be paid for by individuals or employers.

Although there is innovation in program delivery, much program delivery also remains quite conventional, and there is often resistance to changing practices in areas such as alternative admissions processes or modularization or prior learning assessment. The conventional nature of much adult basic education, despite poor success records, has already been noted. In areas where provision is controlled by a particular certification body such as a professional group or a single delivery agent such as a professional school within a university, it may be easier to maintain existing programs than to try new approaches even when there may be demand for the latter.

An interesting instance of the place of innovation is seen in the role in many universities of continuing education activities. Most universities operate continuing education units, often very large ones. However in most universities continuing education operations are expected to be largely or completely self-financing, or even to generate a profit for the main institution. While these units may have greater flexibility in their admissions and programming than do more traditional units, they may also have difficulty getting their programs recognized or their students admitted for study in other parts of the university. In many cases their enrolments are not even reported as part of institutional and national data gathering.

There is also a great danger that the focus of adult learning will continue to rest on those who are already well-educated and successful learners. The thematic review material mentions the importance of reaching adults with low levels of education and skill but the extent to which this is actually occurring is not clear. The reliance on third parties such as employers or tertiary institutions as major providers of adult learning may limit attention to learners with difficulties unless there are specific incentives to reach them.

In adult learning, as in all other areas of education, it is also important to see equity as going beyond the education system alone. To succeed in learning many adults need support with income, housing, child care, or other life circumstances such as drug abuse. If all the attention goes to the education sector these problems will not be dealt with and many adults will be unable to participate in or benefit from new learning opportunities.

CONCLUSION

To summarize in one paper the state of equity in education across four areas of learning and many countries is a daunting task indeed. No doubt this report fails to do full justice to the range of issues and policy options in this important area. Still, the picture that emerges is one that has both hopeful and less hopeful elements.

On the hopeful side, the very fact of ongoing attention to equity issues and the prominent role they play in many areas of the thematic reviews as well as in PISA is a positive sign. Countries are recognizing that grave problems are created when a substantial part of the population lacks appropriate education. The range of efforts being made to improve this situation is heartening. More data are being gathered on the scope of the challenge and on the degree of success being obtained in addressing it. The PISA results show that it is possible to combine high standards of achievement with high levels of equity. In particular the recognition of the importance of the very first years of life to later success offers considerable promise.

One cannot, however, be sanguine about the situation. The available evidence suggests that inequities in education have become worse rather than better in many countries in the last 20 years (OECD 2001a). Most of the dynamics in the education system and in the labour market tend to favour those who are already successful. The education system, while nominally committed to success for all, actually embodies many features that work against such success and changing these will be very difficult. Additional resources to support learning are in short supply in many countries due to restrictions on public spending, while reallocations within sectors or from one sector to another will be politically very difficult to manage. The impact of all the innovation is still either uncertain or unknown.

It is likely that the current scale and scope of effort will fall short on at least two counts. First, as noted several times in this document, the thinking about what is required may still be too small scale. Effective provision of education to large populations depends on having mainstream systems that work well for that purpose. Much of what is now being done in regard to equity is at the margins of existing practice rather than involving changes in the mainstream operation of education. It will be important to watch closely the larger scale changes, such as those in national qualification systems, to see if they succeed. However it can safely be predicted that an approach that depends on extraordinary initiative by a few dedicated individuals and on short-term funding for innovative projects will not be sufficient.

This report has also emphasized the importance of seeing equity in education as something that requires action beyond the education system. Many of the barriers to education lie in people's life circumstances so success will require addressing these circumstances. This means that achieving education equity will necessarily also involve considerations such as supports for income, housing, child care, and personal difficulties such as drug abuse. Much work will be required to see how these elements can be made a part of a lifelong learning strategy.

Finally, the report has noted a variety of areas in which more research and analysis could be particularly useful. A great deal remains to be learned about the current situation and about the impacts of the various policies and programs that are being developed. Many beliefs about education – for example concerning the transformative power of ICTs on adult learning or the value for accessibility of low or free tertiary tuition – appear to lack empirical support. Careful gathering and analysis of evidence is important in assisting policymakers to manage political and fiscal demands in the most effective way possible. The

ongoing interest of the OECD will be important here, as will efforts within national jurisdictions to improve research and analysis in regard to equity.

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