

Lifelong learning helps people, governments and business. Why don't we do more of it?



Countries could easily provide more training opportunities for adults. But they need to be pushed
Image: REUTERS/Darrin Zammit Lupi

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Learning throughout life makes sense. Research shows it is good for your health, your wealth, your civic engagement and your family's future prospects. It prolongs your independent life and enriches your quality of life.

For companies, investing in worker skills makes sense too – it promotes flexibility and creativity, problem-solving, teamwork and an increased sense of agency among staff, making them happier and more productive. These are, of course, exactly the traits needed as companies face the challenges of the latest industrial revolution.

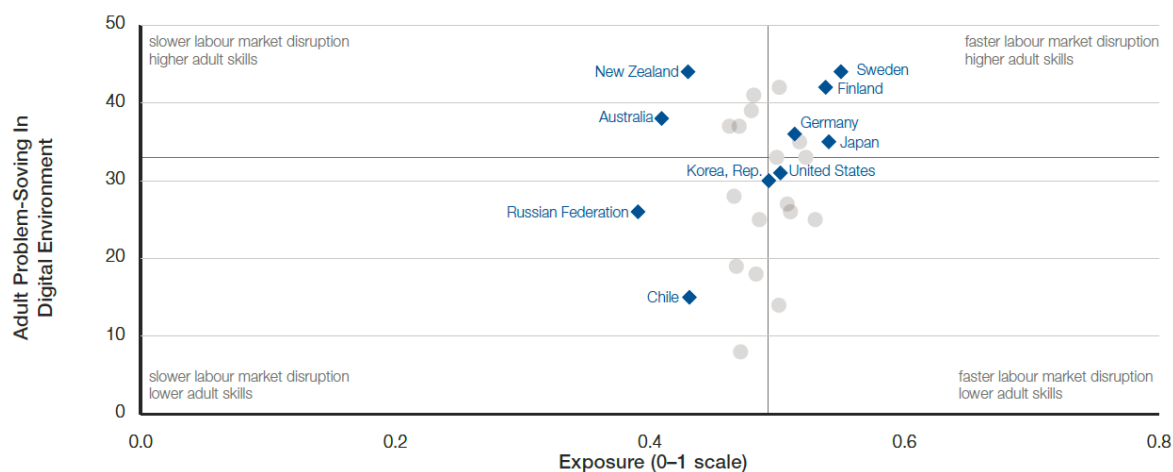
For governments, supporting learning in later life helps to delay the onset of dependency among rapidly ageing populations; plays an important role in overcoming inequality and exclusion; and supports inter-generational learning, creating more resilient families and communities. More broadly, learning fosters improved well-being.

Jacques Delors, then President of the European Commission, summed this up in 1992 when he argued that lifelong learning was crucial to both economic prosperity and social cohesion.

Report after report from multilateral agencies reinforces the value of lifelong learning – from UNESCO's 1972 *Learning to Be*, through to the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study in 2013. The UN acknowledged the importance of adult learning in facing the world's development needs by including lifelong learning in [the fourth of its 2015 Sustainable Development Goals](#): "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

This week's publication of the World Economic Forum Dialogue Series paper, [Accelerating Workforce Reskilling for the Fourth Industrial Revolution](#), makes a welcome addition to the evidence. It highlights the importance of learning at a time when the combination of robotics and artificial intelligence threatens to have the same impact on white collar jobs that the globalization of production and trade had on blue collar jobs in industrial countries. It also points to a rich vein of positive evidence of how enterprises, in particular, have responded to these challenges. Problem-solving in a digital environment will be at a premium and it shows how ready for the challenge different countries are.

This chart shows adult problem-solving, adaptation skills and exposure to labour-market disruption in selected economies:



OECD PIAAC data, World Economic Forum

Lurking beneath its analysis is a recognition that the combination of changes affecting work and wider society carries a real risk of exacerbating the gap between the world's "winners and losers", furthering the extent of inequality in our societies.

With such positive research evidence of learning's benefits and so much collective endorsement by inter-governmental bodies, you would expect widespread evidence of countries re-engineering their education systems to foster learning throughout life. In the majority of developed economies, however, learning beyond initial education gets little

attention in government policies and investment, leaving the size and reach of the provision to market forces.

Yet research also shows that the best predictor of participation in learning in adult life is extended early participation. In workplaces, spending on training is concentrated on the most skilled and most senior staff. Outside work, it is people who thrived in school and college who willingly invest in their own, continuing education. As the head of an Oxford college, Helena Kennedy, once said: "If at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed." There is nothing inevitable about this, but if lifelong learning really is to be for everyone, governments must actively support those who benefited the least first time round and work with business and civil society in motivating adults to take up learning.

Outside of the industrialized countries things look equally bleak. The [Global Partnership for Education \(GPE\)](#) has not prioritized GPE money for adult literacy and lifelong learning after 2015, which means the responsibility for this will have to sit with civil-society organizations. Yet we still have just short of 800 million adults globally who lack basic literacy skills.

One reason for the gap between rhetoric and practice at the level of government is that on the one hand the benefits of adult learning are felt across the range of government departments - the improved health, notably mental health, that learners enjoy benefits health budgets, and offender learning reduces recidivism benefiting justice departments, for example. But on the other hand, the expenditure tends to be made in the margins of the education budget where schools' and universities' needs inevitably dominate.

A second reason may lie in the need, in many countries, for better data on adult participation and achievement. Unlike schools and universities, where the data is easily captured through administrative mechanisms, adult learning is less tidy – adults learn through formal and non-formal courses and through informal learning, and as a result it is more challenging to see who benefits, and more importantly, who misses out. Yet governments need that information to prioritize investment.

Third, to create a system of lifelong learning from cradle to grave involves moving away from the model in which all investment in learning is concentrated on the earliest years and the expectation that the skills developed then will last a lifetime. On top of that, lifelong learning beyond school commands small budgets, so it is unsurprising that so little structural change is evident.

Lifelong learning is not tidy and generates powerful incidental benefits. This is because learning leaks. Skills and aptitudes generated in one context are applied elsewhere. Britain's Ford Motor Company provided a clear example of this in the 1980s. It agreed at the end of a trade bargaining pay round to allocate 0.3% of its wage bill to a scheme, jointly managed at plant level by managers and blue and white collar unions, to support staff with learning

outside of company training. Workers learned to drive, to plaster walls, strengthened their maths, learned Spanish and took Open University degree courses. They took the skills they developed for pleasure back into the workplace. The firm found that absenteeism rates dropped, demarcation disputes on the introduction of new procedures fell back, retention rates improved and the major bi-annual pay strikes symbolic of poor labour relations came to an end. Investing in learning for pleasure improved the bottom line and unions and management alike maintained the scheme as the company downsized its UK workforce over the next 15 years.

Singapore presents a powerful example of what governments can do. Faced with a major challenge to its entrepôt economy from China's rapid development, the government recognized that it needed to support the re-engineering of the country's skills base and established Skills Future Singapore to re-skill existing workers. [Accelerating Workforce Reskilling for the Fourth Industrial Revolution](#) highlights the work of Singapore's Institute for Adult Education which trains teachers and adult coaches in adult relevant teaching and learning skills. It also works with sectoral bodies on identifying emergent skill needs and with enterprises by providing diagnostic tools to assess the current state of workplace learning, offering guidance on how to effectively structure workplace learning activities.

If it is hard in most cases for governments to centrally organize effective lifelong learning strategies centrally, they do better where they devolve responsibility. There is strong evidence that local co-operation is possible at a city or sub-regional level. Examples from Cork in Ireland, the Cape Region in South Africa and Shanghai in China show how Learning Cities bring business, unions, city planners and a range of civil society organizations together with universities, schools and colleges to pool resources to make a difference.

Companies contribute to this work through sectoral skills bodies and by using their supply chains to raise skill levels. Civil society agencies engage under-represented communities. Educational institutions offer improved work placements and refine the curricula to meet local needs. In this way, a wider learning culture can emerge in which risk and creativity are supported, and exclusion and inequality are addressed.

As the World Economic Forum paper demonstrates, the creation of a lifelong learning culture involves a large number of tweaks to our current arrangements. Such initiatives involve co-operation and trust between people working across the boundaries of their day-to-day activities and that can take time. But as the paper also makes clear, the pace of technological, environmental and demographic change is accelerating. If we don't respond quickly the consequences for jobs, security and community cohesion could be severe. As a result, there is an urgent need for governments, enterprises and communities to work to turn the good aspirations of international agreements and company vision statements into practical measures that affect every adult.

Will that happen? The current international evidence gives little cause for optimism. But since we have the ingenuity to create the new technologies, given enough goodwill and commitment, we must surely have a comparable capacity to create opportunities for all adults to participate in learning how to make the best and most inclusive use of them. Don't we?

Written by

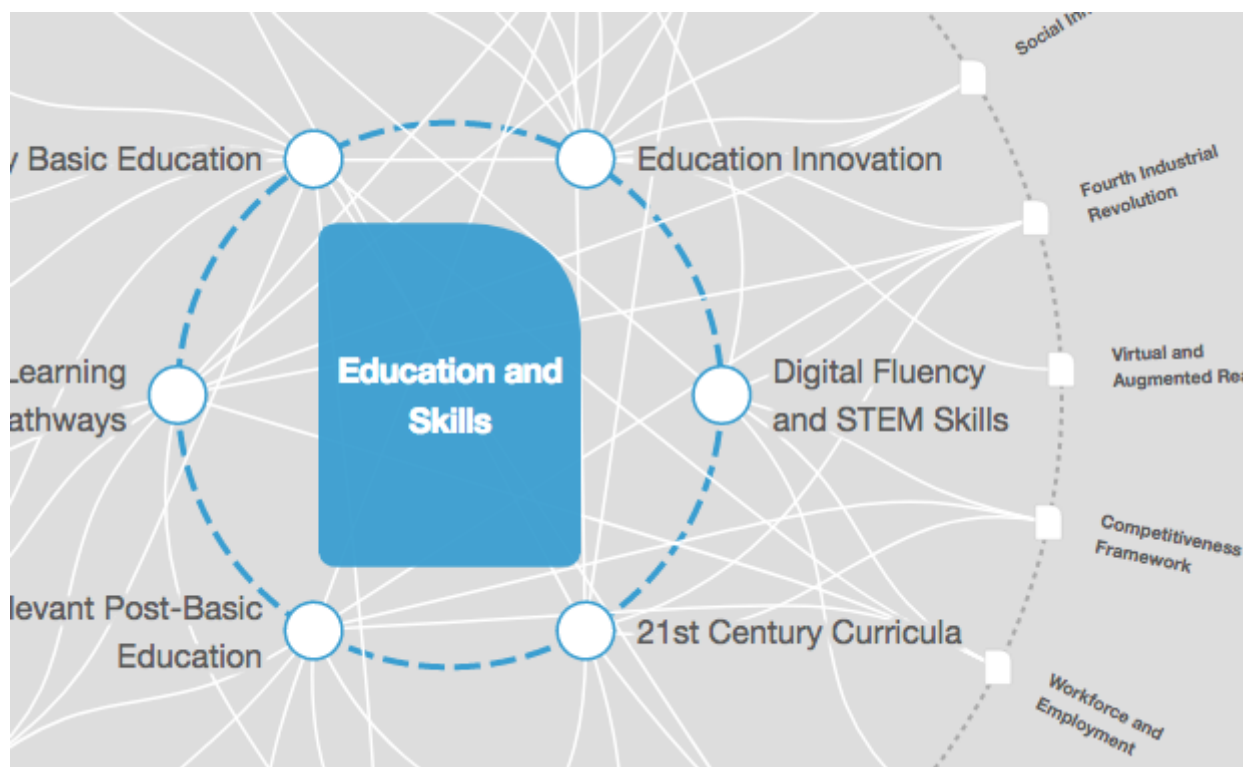
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