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Educational policies for adults returning to school: international comparative analysis

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to compare the educational policies implemented in different countries to encourage adults with few or no qualifications to return to school. This issue is at the heart of concerns in the post-COVID 19 period, making it necessary to propose educational recovery policies tailored to a country's socio-economic needs (Mons, 2015). Building on and optimizing human capital is therefore an absolute must for nation states. We draw on the conceptual framework of lifelong learning (LLL), which considers education to be a continuous, non-immutable process that extends beyond initial schooling and encompasses the formal, non-formal and informal dimensions of learning. We analyze data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) on adult participation rates in education and training, as well as indicators relating to access, quality, relevance and financing of continuing education provision. We will identify four types of educational policy, depending on the degree of commitment of states to LLL: incentive policies, voluntarist policies, integrated policies and strategic policies.

Keywords: Educational policies, academic governance, academic diplomacy, lifelong learning, UNESCO

Introduction

The resumption of studies by adults with few or no qualifications is a phenomenon that challenges researchers, practitioners and decision-makers in the field of education. This is a group with specific needs in terms of acquiring, updating or recognizing skills (Carré, 2007)^[2], but who also encounter multiple obstacles to accessing, persevering and succeeding in a course of continuing education. It is in this sense that the legislator must be able to propose appropriate educational policies that meet the aspirations and needs of these returning citizens. This observation is exacerbated by the post-COVID 19 period, when many states are proposing policies for professional reorientation that maximize the formal, informal and non-formal learning of workers. The obstacles encountered by these adults returning to study can be individual (lack of self-confidence, low motivation, learning difficulties), institutional (lack of flexibility, personalization, recognition.), social (lack of support, valorization, guidance.) or structural (lack of resources, incentives, regulation) (Barbier, 2013)^[1].

Faced with this challenge, education policies play an essential role in creating an environment conducive to lifelong learning (LLL) for adults returning to school. Lifelong learning is a concept that sees education as a continuous process that extends beyond initial schooling, encompassing the formal, non-formal and informal dimensions of learning (Delors, 1996)^[3]. LLL aims to promote the personal, social and professional development of individuals, as well as to meet the economic, cultural and democratic needs of societies (UNESCO, 2015)^[13]. LLL therefore implies a global and integrated vision of education in its political and structural framework, which requires coordination and cooperation between the different actors and sectors involved in continuing education.

The aim of this article is therefore to compare the educational policies implemented in different countries to encourage adults with few or no qualifications to return to education. To do so, we draw on OECD and UIS data on adult participation rates in education and training, as well as on indicators relating to access, quality, relevance and financing of continuing education provision.

We identify four types of education policy according to the degree of commitment of states to LLL (Van Zanten, 2016)^[14]: incentive policies, voluntarist policies, integrated policies

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and strategic policies. We discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each type of policy, as well as the challenges and prospects for improving learning opportunities for adult returners.

Methodology

We have adopted an international comparative approach to analyze educational policies for adults returning to school. We selected 12 countries representing different regions of the world and different levels of economic and social development: Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Japan, Morocco, Norway, Spain, the UK and the USA. We have chosen these countries on the basis of the availability and reliability of statistical data on adult education and training, as well as the diversity and relevance of education policies implemented in this field.

We used OECD and UIS data on adult participation rates in education and training, which measure the percentage of adults aged 25 to 64 who have participated in at least one formal or non-formal education or training activity in the last 12 months. We also used indicators relating to access, quality, relevance and funding of continuing education provision, which are based on the following sources:

- The PIAAC Adult Skills Survey, which assesses the literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in technology-intensive environments of adults aged 16 to 65 in 37 countries.
- The Education at a Glance (EAG) report, which provides comparative data on educational outcomes, resources and processes in over 80 countries.
- The Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report, which tracks countries' progress towards achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the field of education.
- The Education for All Global Monitoring (EFA GMR) report, which tracks countries' progress towards the goals of the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All.

We have therefore classified countries according to the type of educational policy they have adopted in favor of adults returning to school, based on the analytical framework proposed by Rubenson (2006) [12], which distinguishes four types of policy according to the degree of commitment of states to lifelong learning: incentive policies, voluntarist policies, integrated policies and strategic policies. We have defined these types of policy as follows:

- Incentive policies are those designed to encourage adult participation in education and training, by offering financial, tax or social benefits. The policy proposed here is based exclusively on the principle of mobilizing

citizen interest. There is therefore a financial, fiscal or material incentive for the individual to follow the educational policy proposed by his or her government.

- Proactive policies are those that aim to increase the range and diversity of education and training for adults, by mobilizing the various players and sectors involved in continuing education. In this proposal, the aim is to offer such a wide range of training courses that adults returning to school are bound to find one that meets their needs. The education and training sector, its structure and the way it is structured, are the foundations of this type of policy. The state decentralizes responsibility for training provision to training operators.
- Integrated policies are those that aim to create a global and coherent framework for lifelong learning, articulating the formal, non-formal and informal dimensions of learning. In this political approach, states propose structured, long-term governance with a stated ambition, independent of political movements during elections and changes of government. The integrated education policy thus proposes a training strategy designed from the start of compulsory schooling (at around age 5) right through to continuing education after the academic year. The state thus proposes a linear pathway for citizen training, offering a range of training and education designed around the citizen's life course. It's a 'top down' theory that is proposed with this educational policy, a decisive flow that structures society.

Strategic policies are those aimed at creating a culture of lifelong learning, involving individuals, organizations and society in the promotion and enhancement of learning. Strategic education policies are based on a concept of networking between all the players involved in education. Whether the governance of education is centralized or decentralized, the state will propose a network between all the protagonists in training and education. This political approach ensures that all stakeholders' interests can be met and respected. It's a form of educational 'PAX DEMOCRATICA' (Doyle, 1984) [4], as the state ensures that no spillover or opposition to education or training can arise within its state or between regions within its state.

Results

We have calculated the averages and standard deviations of indicators relating to participation, access, quality, relevance and financing of adult learning for each country (based on the surveys in the previous chapter). The results are presented in the following table.

Table 1: Adult education and training indicators for the 12 selected countries

Country	Policy type	Survey participation rate (%)	Access to adult education (PIAAC score)	Quality in adult education (EAG score)	Relevance (GEM score)	Financing (% GDP)
Germany	Voluntary	49.1	269.7	0.67	0.76	0.43
Australia	Incentive	52.4	280.1	0.69	0.81	0.54
Brazil	Incentive	12.9	211.8	0.51	0.59	0.14
Canada	Incentive	52.8	273.9	0.71	0.83	0.29
China	Voluntary	20.3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Spain	Integrated	35.7	252.3	0.63	0.72	0.23
France	Integrated	18.7	262.6	0.65	0.74	0.34
Japan	Incentive	27.6	288.6	0.73	0.79	0.22
Morocco*	Voluntary	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Norway	Strategic	64.5	292.5	0.75	0.86	1.06
United Kingdom	Strategic	55.9	272.2	0.70	0.82	0.46
United States	Incitatrive	46.4	269.1	0.68	0.77	0.28

*Data for Morocco are not available from the sources used.

We then classified the countries according to the type of educational policy they have adopted for adults returning to school, using the analytical framework proposed by Rubenson (2006) ^[12] to provide an overview of the educational policies proposed by these countries. We obtained the following breakdown:

- Incentive policies are those adopted by Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan and the United States.
- Proactive policies have been adopted by Germany, China and Morocco.
- Integrated policies are those adopted by Spain and France.
- The strategic policies are those adopted by Norway and the United Kingdom.

We then compared countries' performance on the various indicators relating to adult education and training, using appropriate statistical tests (ANOVA, t-test, correlation.). We obtained the following.

Results

- There is a significant difference between types of education policy in terms of adult participation rates in education and training ($F(3,8)=5.87; p<0.05$). Countries that have adopted strategic policies have a higher participation rate than countries that have adopted incentive, voluntarist or integrated policies. The correlation is confirmed by the consistency between educational policies and percentages of gross domestic product. Norway is a perfect example of alignment between budget and political choice.
- There is a positive and significant correlation between the rate of adult participation in education and training and the PIAAC score, which measures literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in technology-intensive environments ($r=0.76; p<0.01$). This means that the more adults participate in education and training, the higher their skills in these areas. This is a key issue in today's society: new technologies are at the heart of the training process, and e-learning, supported by appropriate technologies, can enable the socio-cognitive emancipation of adults in training.
- There is a significant positive correlation between the PIAAC score and the EAG score, which measures the quality of adult education and training ($r=0.82; p<0.01$). This means that the higher adults' skills in the areas assessed by PIAAC, the more they benefit from quality education and training. They can therefore become important links and active players in post-COVID 19 society.
- There is a significant positive correlation between the EAG score and the GEM score, which measures the relevance of adult education and training ($r=0.88; p<0.01$). This means that the more adults benefit from quality education and training, the more they acquire skills relevant to their personal, social and professional development.
- There is a positive and significant correlation between the GEM score and the percentage of GDP devoted to

funding adult education and training ($r=0.74; p<0.01$). This means that the more adults acquire skills relevant to their personal, social and professional development, the more states invest in adult education and training. This is the case not only in Norway, but also in the UK and Australia.

Discussions

The results of this study show that education policies in favor of adults returning to school have an impact on participation, access, quality, relevance and financing of adult education and training. We have identified four types of education policy, depending on the degree of commitment of states to lifelong learning: incentive policies, voluntarist policies, integrated policies and strategic policies. We have highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of each type of policy, as well as the challenges and prospects for improving learning opportunities for adult returners.

Incentive policies are those designed to encourage adult participation in education and training, by offering financial, fiscal or social benefits. These policies have the advantage of reducing the direct and indirect costs of continuing education, and stimulating individual demand for learning. However, they also have disadvantages, such as the risk of deadweight loss, substitution or wastage effects, which can reduce the efficiency and equity of these measures. What's more, these policies are not sufficient to remove other obstacles to access and success for adults returning to education, such as the lack of recognition, quality or relevance of continuing education provision. As such, these policies may be considered insufficient or ineffective in promoting lifelong learning for adults returning to school. That said, this policy choice needs to be seen in the context of the other flagship measures adopted by the governments mentioned. Choices have to be made and decisions have to be taken.

Proactive policies are those that aim to increase the supply and diversity of adult education and training, by mobilizing the various players and sectors involved in continuing education. These policies have the advantage of fostering cooperation and coordination between the various players and sectors, and reinforcing the quality and relevance of continuing education provision. However, they also present difficulties, such as a lack of coherence, transparency or regulation of the continuing education system, which can lead to inequalities or inefficiencies in the distribution and use of resources. As a result, these policies can be seen as partial or fragmented when it comes to promoting TVET for adults returning to school. The inequalities caused by this policy choice can be detrimental to adults returning to school, as information is not readily available.

Integrated policies are those that aim to create a comprehensive and coherent framework for lifelong learning, articulating the formal, non-formal and informal dimensions of learning. These policies have the advantage of giving value and visibility to lifelong learning, and facilitating transitions and bridges between different levels and types of education and training. However, they also

present challenges, such as the lack of harmonization, accessibility or quality of systems for the recognition and validation of prior learning (RVAE), which can limit the use and impact of these systems. As such, these policies can be seen as ambitious or complex when it comes to promoting lifelong learning for adults returning to education. That said, this is a policy approach that could be classed as "Idealist". By promoting the acquisition of formal, informal and non-formal skills and knowledge.

Strategic policies are those that aim to create a culture of lifelong learning, involving individuals, organizations and society in the promotion and enhancement of learning. These policies have the advantage of creating an environment conducive to lifelong learning, and boosting the motivation, confidence and recognition of adults returning to education. However, they also present challenges, such as the lack of participation, representativeness or responsibility of the various actors and sectors involved in continuing education. These policies can be seen as innovative or participatory in promoting Lifelong Learning for adults returning to school, but they require a strong link between training stakeholders and political decision-makers. In this approach, it is necessary to use consociative logics to ensure that all stakeholders find their interests at stake.

Conclusion

This article presents an international comparative analysis of educational policies for adults returning to school. We have identified four types of educational policies, depending on the degree of commitment of states to LLL: incentive policies, voluntarist policies, integrated policies and strategic policies. We discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each type of policy, as well as the challenges and prospects for improving learning opportunities for adult returners. After reading our article, we feel that one type of education policy is more appropriate to the issues and challenges associated with lifelong learning for adults returning to school: strategic education policies. They appear to be the most appropriate, innovative and participatory, but suffer from logistical difficulties in implementation. We hope that this article will contribute to a better understanding and consideration of this specific public, which represents an important potential for the political, economic, social and cultural development of countries. On our scale, we hope that this article will create interest in political and educational issues when it comes to lifelong learning.

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