

## ADULT EDUCATION: A Lifelong Journey

# Reflections on adult learning from abroad

In May 2003, the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (MEQ) sent a 15-person delegation of adult educators on a study mission to see how recent policies have been developed and put into place in four EU countries. The group visited government officials, programs, agencies and NGOs in Ireland, Sweden, Germany and England, and spent a day at the OECD in Paris. The delegation was divided into teams that analyzed each visit through a particular set of lenses including policy, literacy/general education, information and guidance, and vocational. After returning to Quebec, each member wrote an individual report, each team wrote a group report, and the entire delegation has become part of the implementation team for the new Quebec policy in the English sector. They are currently working with a writer to produce a public report on the visits and to organize an invitational symposium in February 2004 to engage 100 more individuals from every part of the education and community sectors in shaping the new policy to meet the needs of their constituents.



I was privileged to be one of the 15 Study Mission members. The MEQ has given us permission to share some personal reflections, of which some small excerpts appear below. They raise more questions, but offer some starting points in looking for answers. I will be publishing a fuller version on line by the end of January 2004. These views do not reflect those of the MEQ or of any other members of the group. LS

## Reflection

### BALANCING THE ECONOMIC AND THE SOCIAL

There has been a shift in the thinking at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In the mid-1990's, they focused heavily on adult learning and education for employability, productivity, international competitiveness, and globalization. Now, partly in response to concerns from the Nordic countries where democratic citizenship is valued as an outcome of adult education, the OECD is calling for more balance in assessing the benefits, social and political as well as economic.

The OECD sees independent information, advice and guidance (IAG) as central to the design and provision of quality adult learning. Their reviews have shown little coherence in this area outside the UK [See Matrix, p.13.].

Policies, where they exist, often cite the OECD (1995) and place disproportionate emphasis on the economic. How can they be shifted for more balance in expected outcomes? How solid and current is the research that underpins policy?

Many policies focus on isolated components and compartmentalize them according to department objectives. How can cross-department and integrated approaches be

developed within current structures?

### **OECD Perspectives 2003**

From a 1999-2000 study of adult learning in nine countries, including Canada, the OECD identifies six key findings:

- Make learning more attractive
- Improve accessibility
- Enhance financial incentives
- Improve quality
- Focus on efficiency
- Adapt a holistic approach

Their recommendations to countries and the reforms that have already been set in motion have the same ingredients.

### **Recommendations:**

- Coordinated approach
- Outreach, information and guidance
- Recognition of prior learning
- Evaluation
- Forum for discussion needed for sharing and resolving issues
- Regional disparity must be addressed

Miscellaneous: Teacher training and more research

### **Key Issues in Information, Advice and Guidance**

- Making delivery more effective
- For young people - In schools and tertiary education - Out-of-school youth
- For adults
- Widening access through more diverse delivery
- Improving career information

### **Resources for career guidance**

- Staff
- Funding

### **Improving strategic leadership**

- How can policy influence practice? (Have felt it has worked too much the other way)
- How can policy and practice be brought more closely together?
- Models of lifelong guidance

## FOUR BROAD CONCLUSIONS

- **Lifelong learning is driving change**

They have found a lot of the change is still at the level of rhetoric.

- **Youth and the unemployed continue to be the main clients**

- **For poorly serviced groups, information is not enough**

They have found too much emphasis on information re: services.

- **As yet, no country has an effective lifelong guidance system**

They have found many of the pieces, but not working coherently.

*Highlights from Beyond Rhetoric: Adult Learning Policies and Practices* can be found at

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/18/57/18466358.pdf>

[www.oecd.org/edu/careerguidance](http://www.oecd.org/edu/careerguidance) revised as people contribute (international questionnaires and notes are there)

Source: Meeting at OECD May 19, 2003, with Patrick Werquin, Director for Education, Education & Training Policy Division, and Richard Sweet who is managing the international Review of Career Guidance Policy.

## Reflection

## MEASURING THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING

The UK is making one of the most coherent attempts to harmonize the diverse components of adult learning. However, Tom Schuller, then Dean of Continuing Education at Birkbeck College, and Co-director of The Center for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, funded by the Department of Education and Skills, has some concerns about the narrowing of focus since the 1998-99 DfEE document, *The Learning Age*, which offered a broad vision of lifelong learning. Now he fears there is too much counting, of the wrong sort, and an unfortunate and false polarity between skills acquisition and well being. The emphasis on targets has become too great and threatens to distort the intent of an otherwise far-reaching adult learning agenda. Tom noted another current strand in a drive for a 50% enrolment target in higher education which has led to a focus on 18 – 30 year olds, and an attempt to get more young people in. This, he commented, is “all being done in the name of international competitiveness, ignoring that the UK is near the top of the EU league tables.” A November 1997 report entitled *Learning for the 21st Century—First Report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning*, found the UK had a high completion rate in higher education. On the other hand, the focus on the “wider benefits of learning” implies going beyond the individual to examine its effects on families, communities, and nations. Wider also means looking beyond the economic at health, family life, and active citizenship. Their study is a joint initiative with the Institute of Education in conjunction with the 1958 cohort study, a longitudinal study which tracks through periodic surveys all those living in Great Britain who were born between 3 and 9 March, 1958, to monitor their physical, educational, social and economic development. The center has already produced

several studies, including one on the benefits of learning to health.

Source: Meeting with Tom Schuller, Dean, Continuing Education, Birkbeck College, and Co-director, The Center for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, London May 21, 2003

**The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning** was established by the Department for Education and Skills in 1999 to investigate the full range of benefits that learning brings both to the individual learner and society as a whole. Our two main objectives are:

- To produce and apply models for measuring and analysing the contribution that learning makes to wide ranging social and private goals.
- To devise and apply improved methods for measuring the value of various forms of learning, such as community-based adult learning, where the outcomes are not necessarily standard ones such as qualifications. [www.learningbenefits.net](http://www.learningbenefits.net)

## Reflection

### THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

In every country we visited, informants at the government, school and community levels all referred to the IALS and the PISA as major drivers of current policy.

## Reflection

### THE ROLE OF HISTORY AND CULTURE ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS ADULT LEARNING

In countries such as Sweden and Germany where early literacy campaigns began over 400 years ago and lasted for centuries, adult learning is taken somewhat for granted. Yet, it has developed in dramatically different models that reflect cultural differences. Today, EU and international pressures are promoting more homogeneity of policy. We should pay attention to the resistance and the adaptations in different contexts, as much as to the commonalities.



## **Reflection**

### **THE POTENTIAL THREAT OF LIFELONG LEARNING TO ADULT EDUCATION**

The director of the DIE, the German Institute for Adult Education, expressed a concern that adult education could be undermined by the current rhetoric of lifelong learning. Some governments are already suggesting that if learning continues over a lifetime, then investing in the early years is more important than investing in adults. This represents a misunderstanding of the concept but can result in a shift of funding away from an already under-funded adult sector. Family literacy that focuses more attention on the child than the adult is one example of such a shift.

## **Reflection**

### **CAN COMMUNITY EDUCATION BE INTEGRATED INTO RECOGNIZED ADULT LEARNING WITHOUT DESTROYING ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE COMMUNITY?**

In Ireland, we saw a 30-year-old network of paid regional adult education organizers who played a stimulating role as brokers between programs and services that were in place and the needs and interests of community members who might want something else. Can such networks be sustained when accreditation and qualification become the focus?

## **Reflection**

### **GENDER AND ADULT BASIC EDUCATION**

In several countries, we heard talk about gender, and a reminder that gender means men as well as women. The groups most targeted and hardest to reach in all four countries were unemployed men over 45. In Ireland, adult basic education at the community level works through Women's and Men's Education Networks that grew out of women's anti-poverty groups in the 1980's. They evolved in response to the finding that men and women at the beginning levels wanted to learn separately. In North America, talk about gender in ABE is not part of the mainstream discourse.



## The Matrix

The UK has developed a national quality standard for Information, Advice and Guidance services that is seen as exemplary by the OECD.

<http://www.matrix-quality-standard.com>

## The Learning Age

There is a need to rethink and broaden the notion of lifelong education. Not only must it adapt to changes in the nature of work, but it must also constitute a continuous process of forming whole human beings - their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as the critical faculty and ability to act. It should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to play their social role at work and in the community.

Jacques Delors (1996),  
*Learning: The Treasure Within*.

Epigraph, "The Learning Age" Green Paper, DfEE, February 1998, is available from: The Stationery Office Limited, P.O. Box 276, LONDON SW8 5DT Telephone: 0171 873 0011 Fax: 0171 873 8200

<http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/nagcell/index.htm>

## A flexible workplace basic skills project

WORKBASE, a UK provider of basic skills training since 1978, won a contract in 2001 at Heathrow Airport Ltd to engage at least 7 employers in the supply chain to offer customized basic skills training for their employees. Funding came from the EU Social Fund.

We noticed the flexibility to meet students' needs. At Heathrow, students are assessed against the national basic skills three levels of Entry Skills. However, because many of them are not literate in their mother-tongue, and the initial assessment is written, the WORKBASE trainer engages them in conversation about their experience. WORKBASE promotes embedding basic skills. They do not call any courses "literacy." They build ESOL into courses on supervisory skills. For the most basic learners, they offer "Communicating Confidently" with a focus on customer care, health and safety, and how to engage in conversation.

Because of staff shortages and time constraints, the course we visited could only meet twice a month for four months to make up its eight classes – not much; but the motivation was high.

The course includes advice and guidance, providing a half hour of guidance one-on-one to each student. If they want more, they can go to the Partnership office on their own time, but at no cost. They can look for a sign that says IAG - Information, Advice and Guidance – both career and retirement related.\*

Source: Meeting with Maxine Donovan, WORKBASE trainer, Heathrow Airport, May 22, 2003 E-mail: [workbase@workbase.org.uk](mailto:workbase@workbase.org.uk)

\* [See the \*Matrix\* above](#)

[Watch our web site](#) in late January for elaborated notes on EU visits.

## Where do policy-makers get their data?

"Too many publications – and too many practitioners - are using secondary sources for ...figures in their reports and publicity, with no knowledge of their origins," writes Fiona Frank, former Executive Director of the Workplace Basic Skills Network (UK). She has looked at the primary sources for several recurrent pieces of data in the discourse of British basic skills, among them:

- Poor literacy and numeracy levels cost the UK £10 billion per year.
- The cost to industry specifically is £4.8 billion per year.
- Many employers are not aware of the dearth of basic skills in the UK's workforce. Only 4 per cent cite it as a problem.

These and other figures appeared most recently in Lifelong Learning News, Spring 2002, Issue 5, a government publication; the source cited was the Department for Education and Skills' *Skills for Life Strategy*, 2001.

Frank notes that Peter Robinson<sup>2</sup>, a researcher at the London School of Economics, had critiqued the use of these figures in 1997, saying "The £5 or £10 billion figure ...quoted for the cost of poor basic skills to British Industry is one of the least reliable figures in the whole debate." They were derived from two sources: the government's annual Skills Needs surveys of employers in 1994-96, and a 1992 Gallup survey of 400 companies published in 1993 by ALBSU (now the Basic Skills Agency) as *The Cost to Industry: Basic Skills and the UK Workforce*.

According to Frank, Robinson explained that the Skills Needs surveys asked a large sample of employers with over 25 employees if they had a 'skills gap' – i.e. if there was a gap between the skills of their current employees and the skills they needed to meet business objectives. Only 18 per cent of respondents said there was such a gap; and only 23 per cent of those respondents – i.e. 4 per cent of all medium and large employers questioned – felt the gap was in the area of literacy and numeracy. Nearly three times more complained about the lack of management skills, general communication skills, and personal skills such as motivation and computer literacy. In the 1992 Gallup survey of 400 organizations employing over 50 people, 15 per cent said that some of their staff had problems with the basic skills needed to do work-related tasks effectively. These respondents came up with some estimates of the costs associated with these poor basic skills (e.g. loss of customers due to inaccurate orders; cost of recruiting new staff; costs of duplication of work). Despite the fact that less than a fifth of respondents had reported staff with basic skills 'gaps,' the report grossed these figures up to £4.8 billion, to represent the costs to 100 per cent of all 400,000 firms in the UK employing over 50 people. The figure has since been inflated to £10 billion to reflect the extra costs covered by small businesses.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, P. (1997). Literacy, Numeracy and Economic Performance. London: LSE Centre for Economic Performance, September.

