



# Action plan for innovation in adult learning systems

Outcomes of the virtual conference  
'Innovative Approaches for  
Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems'  
on 31 January – 1 February 2022



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# Innovation in adult learning systems: the time is now

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted labour markets during a time when they were already undergoing deep structural changes because of digitalisation, globalisation, population ageing and the transition to a low-carbon economy. The COVID-crisis has accelerated some of these structural changes by hastening the adoption of new technologies, transforming work preferences and practices, and changing consumption habits. For individuals, firms and societies to benefit from these transformations in the world of work, **there is an urgent need for upskilling and reskilling for growing jobs and sectors, in particular in the digital and green economy.**

Yet, increasing adult participation in high-quality adult learning is not straightforward. While many OECD countries have tried to reform adult education and training systems, these efforts have often lead to at best marginal increases in adult learning participation (OECD, 2020[1]). The OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) suggests that less than half of adults in European countries and the US participate in training in a given year. Some groups, such as adults who are lower skilled or older, are even less likely to train (OECD, 2019[2]). The pandemic has posed additional challenges for learning participation through social distancing measures, productivity pressures in essential services and the challenges of delivering education and training online. Unsurprisingly, data from the European Labour Force Survey (LFS) shows that adult learning participation sharply decreased in 2020, after a decade of continuous growth (OECD, 2021[3]).

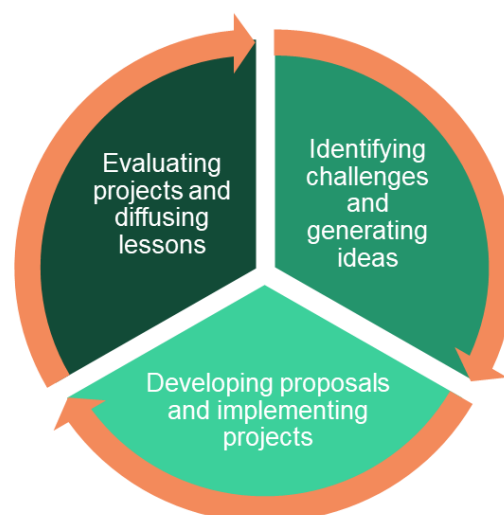
Despite these challenges, **the post-COVID recovery could lead to enormous opportunities for innovation** in adult learning systems. In this time of rapid change and increased complexity, policy-makers cannot assume that “existing structures, processes and interventions remain the most appropriate or effective means for the public sector to achieve its purpose and deliver upon government and citizen needs and expectations” (OECD, 2019[2]). Instead, they have the chance to implement innovative ideas that increase the future-readiness of their adult learning systems. However, what do we mean by innovation in this context?

*In the OECD’s Declaration of Public Sector Innovation, innovation is understood as implementing something novel to achieve impact (OECD, 2019[2]). In the context of adult learning systems, this might encompass a wide-range of activities, be this a new strategy, policy, programme or project. Examples include upgrading existing ways to incentivise adult learning; making use of new technology to deliver training; experimenting with new ways to certify training or developing new training formats to prepare individuals for emerging jobs in the green economy.*

In this context, the 2022 online conference Innovative approaches for future-ready adult learning systems brought together policy makers, experts and practitioners to discuss the latest innovations in adult learning in Europe and the US. The conference was held over two days. It included presentations from the OECD, expert panels, and discussion tables. **Three areas for action when pursuing innovation in adult learning** emerged from the conference discussions. These actions can also be understood as three stages in an innovation lifecycle (Figure 1).

This action plan for policy-makers and practitioners is part of a series of OECD publications on the functioning, effectiveness and resilience of adult learning systems in the context of a changing world of work. This project was supported by the JPMorgan Chase Foundation as part of its \$350 million, five-year global commitment to the future of work. Bringing together all relevant partners to implement the action plan is needed for ‘getting skills right’ and creating more responsive training systems and inclusive labour markets for the world tomorrow.

**Figure 1 - The innovation lifecycle**



Source: based on OECD (2020[4]), The public sector innovation lifecycle, OECD Working Papers on Public Governance No. 37, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/0d1bf7e7-en>

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## Action area 1 – How to identify challenges and generate new ideas

**Identifying the challenges** of an existing adult learning system is often the first step on the pathway to innovation. These challenges can relate to established aspects of the system, such as a lack of quality assurance of adult learning offers. They can also relate to emerging issues such as the need to prepare the adult learning system for the transition to a low-carbon, increasingly digitalised economy and the resulting changes in skill demand. Yet, many policy-makers and practitioners find it difficult to reflect on existing or emerging problems when caught up in the day-to-day operational aspects of running the existing adult learning system. It is critical that organisations create spaces and forums for continuous learning and reflection to identify opportunities for innovation (OECD, 2020[4]). For policy-makers, tools to benchmark the performance of adult learning systems, such as the *OECD's Dashboard on Priorities for Adult Learning*, can also be useful to identify areas where innovation is needed.

*The OECD Dashboard on Priorities for Adult Learning compares the future-readiness of countries' adult learning systems and enables countries to benchmark the performance of their system along seven dimensions: i) urgency, ii) coverage, iii) inclusiveness, iv) flexibility and guidance, v) alignment with skill needs, vi) perceived training impact, and vii) financing. Data for the dashboard comes from a variety of quantitative data sources, including the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), the European Continuing Vocational Training Survey, and the European Adult Education Survey. Since its 2021 update, the Dashboard also includes structured information on key adult learning policies implemented in each country.*

<https://www.oecd.org/employment/skills-and-work/adult-learning/dashboard.htm>

During the 2022 Conference on Innovative Approaches for Future-Ready Adult Learning Systems, one session focused on the innovation in adult learning needed as a response to climate mitigation policies and the green transition of OECD labour markets:

- The *French National Observatory for Jobs and Occupations of the Green Economy (Observatoire national des emplois et métiers de l'économie verte, Onemev)* (*Observatoire national des emplois et métiers de l'économie verte, Onemev*) was discussed as an example of how governments can institutionalise forums to discuss emerging skill challenges. The Observatory brings together representatives of different ministries, agencies, the public employment services and regional observatories to identify the skills, possible transition pathways for individuals and training needed in the context of the green economy.

Beyond this example, speakers during the conference session on preparing workers for the green transition also reflected on the framework conditions needed for successful implementation, such as the certification of 'green skills'. They discussed the opportunities arising from the green transition, such offering a pathway out of poverty for some groups.

**Generating ideas** that address the identified challenges of the existing adult learning system is the natural next step in the innovation process. New ideas for interventions in adult learning can come from a variety of sources, including: consulting stakeholders – including users or clients – or supporting them to independently generate ideas; reviewing new qualitative and quantitative data; and considering the possibilities offered by new technologies. Examining approaches to similar challenges taken in other countries or regions can also be a useful source of inspiration for new ideas. The OECD's *Getting Skills Right Series* examines the functioning, effectiveness and resilience of adult learning systems. Presenting both thematic reports on specific policy issues and in-depth country reviews, it can help countries to generate ideas on how to get skills right. As part of this series, practical and concise guidance for policy-makers and practitioners is provided in a series of short action plans on i) *engaging low-skilled adults in learning*, ii) *creating responsive adult learning systems* and iii) *making adult learning work in social partnership*.

During the conference, one session focused on industry-led talent development and discussed how company insights could be leveraged to generate new ideas for adult learning:

- *Skillnet Ireland*, a business support agency of the Government of Ireland, was discussed as an example of how governments can support enterprise-led innovation creation. The agency supports more than 70 distinct networks of private-sector businesses spanning a broad range of businesses, from Animation Skillnet – a network of

companies and freelancers in the animation, games and VFX sectors – to XLVets Skillnet – a network of companies in the veterinary and agribusiness sector. In these networks, enterprises jointly identify their skill needs, generate ideas of how training can address these needs, and procure training from providers. Skillnet Ireland currently supports more than 20 000 businesses and more than 80 000 individuals every year.

Speakers during this session argued that firms might be faster and more flexible than governments to adapt training. It also included examples on how firms can pool resources to jointly forecast future training needs or develop training.

## Action area 2 – How to develop proposals and implement projects

**Developing proposals** is the process of turning ideas into actionable plans for an adult learning strategy, policy, programme, project or other activity. To ensure that decision-makers and practitioners can make an informed choice about a plan and assess its relative merits, it should set out the costs and benefits of a specific action, as well as the costs and benefits of not pursuing the action (OECD, 2020[4]). Proposals can be developed by a variety of adult learning stakeholders, be they public administrations, social partners, professional organisations, education and training providers and civil society organisations. Decision-makers at any level may find it useful to develop proposals to structure and weigh their ideas.

In a conference session on sharing financial responsibility for training, the European Commission shared their proposal for Individual Learning Accounts, which they published at the end of 2021:

- The *proposal for a Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts* aims to address the key bottlenecks for individuals to train. It proposes to establish Individual Learning Accounts in the Member States and in collaboration with social partners. The core suggestion is the establishment of personal accounts, which would give adults an individualised budget to spend on training. Additionally, it suggests that Member States and social partners establish the framework conditions for such accounts to work, including: i) establishing a digital registry of labour-market and quality-assured training eligible for such funding; ii) opportunities for career guidance and the validation of prior learning; and iii) paid training leave. The proposal was developed in 2021, following the publication of a roadmap, public consultation and a detailed impact assessment. At the time of writing, the proposal is under negotiation with Member States.

Speakers during the conference session also reflected on the need to incentivise both individuals and enterprises to contribute financially to training and the complexities of doing so in multi-level governance adult learning systems. What stood out, however, was that all speakers emphasised that money alone was not enough to engage adults in learning, but that providing time, information and other support were equally important.

**Implementation** is about putting the innovation into action, while flexibly adapting an initial plan to real world challenges. Using technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality in the implementation of adult learning interventions introduces an additional layer of innovation. The OECD increasingly provides *implementation support to countries who want to reform their adult learning systems*. Current projects in the area of adult learning innovation implemented through the European Commission's Technical Support Instrument include, for example, supporting the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science to design a new regulatory framework to incentivise employers to upskill and reskill their employees, and supporting Italy to improve the recognition of competences through Provincial Centres for Adult Education.

*“The Technical Support Instrument (TSI) is the EU programme that provides tailor-made technical expertise to EU Member States to design and implement reforms. The support is demand driven and does not require co-financing from Member States. It is an important pillar of the EU's initiative to help Member States mitigate the economic and social consequences of the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis.”*

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/overview-funding-programmes/technical-support-instrument-tsi\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/overview-funding-programmes/technical-support-instrument-tsi_en)

Beyond this, the OECD develops online tools that support countries in the implementation of adult learning policy. The *OECD Skills Profiling Tool*, for example, facilitates the work of counsellors providing career guidance and advice through the assessment of technical and transversal skills.

During the conference, one session focused on leveraging technology to introduce innovation:

- *Cognizant* was discussed as an example of a provider of immersive learning experiences, which can help increase learner engagement and retention in different industries. It makes use of advances in artificial intelligence, virtual, augmented and mixed reality to deliver learning in a virtual world that allows for interaction with the subject. For instance, Cognizant has developed a prototype for a virtual English-language learning application, which allows individuals to experience language learning in an integrated virtual world, for example by simulating interactions with staff and other passengers at a busy train station.

Beyond this example, speakers during this conference session gave other examples on how technology was used to improve adult learning systems, such as making skills visible through digital badges; improving career guidance through digital services and matching skill supply and demand using artificial intelligence applications.

## Action area 3 – Evaluating projects and diffusing lessons

**Evaluation** is needed to assess the merit or worth of an implemented innovation in adult learning. There are many types of evaluation approaches and methods, but at its core, an evaluation constitutes a systematic assessment of the design, implementation and results of an intervention. For this assessment, evaluations draw on evaluation criteria. The OECD's DAC Network of Development Evaluation has recently updated its widely used evaluation criteria, which are relevant to the evaluation of adult learning interventions (Figure 2). Behind the criterion of relevance, for example, lies the question of whether an intervention is doing the right things; behind the criterion of impact lies the question of what difference an intervention makes. Evaluating innovations brings with it the additional challenge that innovations have a degree of unpredictability, necessitating that policy-makers and practitioners keep an eye on unexpected or unintended results of an intervention.

Figure 2 - OECD/ DAC Evaluation criteria



Source: OECD/DAC Network on Development Evaluation (2019[5]), Better Criteria for Better Evaluation. Revised evaluation criteria definitions and principles for use, Paris, OECD Publishing, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/revised-evaluation-criteria-dec-2019.pdf>

The session on coaching adults to train during the conference featured a project that had been informed by the results of experimentation and evaluation:

- *Huis van het leren/Leerwinkel* provides learning and career guidance for disadvantaged groups in Flanders, Belgium. It functions as a one-stop-shop helping individuals to navigate the adult education and training landscapes, as well as other economic and social challenges they encounter. This model was informed by the 'Guidance and Orientation for Adult Learnings' project, which expanded and evaluated existing models of guidance and orientation for low-educated adults in six European countries between 2015 and 2018.

Speakers also discussed the value of offering career guidance through trade unions and the benefits of focusing on skills rather than occupations for career guidance.

**Diffusing lessons** is the final stage in the innovation lifecycle, before it returns to the generation of new ideas stage. It involves sharing the lessons learnt from an adult learning intervention to adapt or upscale the innovation, as well as to inform other projects in the adult learning space. This stage is key to maximising the value added of single innovation projects, which in themselves may not deliver the expected results (OECD, 2020[4]).

During the conference, one session focused on reaching out to vulnerable adults. One of the key themes of the discussion was the importance of facilitating the sharing of lessons learnt in particular amongst actors that support this target group, due to their often-complex support needs:

- *Mama learns German (Mama lernt Deutsch)* is a project based in Munich, Germany, which aims to increase German language skills of women with a migration background. Women receive low-threshold language training in small groups, while childcare for their small children is provided. The project started in Munich in 2007 and has since then expanded rapidly in the city. Similar delivery models can be found in other larger cities in Germany. Diffusing lessons learnt through partnerships at different levels (local, regional, national) was highlighted as an important success factor for working with this target group.

Beyond this example, speakers during this conference session discussed how to support migrants and refugees in integrating into the labour market of their host country. They highlighted integrated education and training models that, among other innovations, take a holistic approach of social services to support adult learners.

## Innovation in adult learning systems: Three big ideas for the future

The 2022 conference on Innovative approaches for future-ready adult learning systems showcased a large number of adult learning strategies, policies, programmes and projects across European countries and the United States and their lessons learnt along the innovation life-cycle. Moving beyond these examples, the final session of the conference discussed three big ideas that may help shape a new vision of adult learning systems:

1. **Human rights-based approaches** consider adult education and training a fundamental social, economic and cultural right. UNESCO is a key promoter of enshrining a rights-based approach into adult learning systems, for example in the form of life-long learning entitlements, but also by putting in place appropriate framework conditions to facilitate adult learning, such as career guidance.
2. **Transparency and accountability** in adult education and training is key for individuals to identify appropriate learning offers, but also from the perspective of effective and efficient use of public resources. It implies the collection and (open) access to data on learning offers, outcomes and returns to training for stakeholders and the public at large. Such transparency is currently lacking in many adult learning systems due to their fragmentation, under-developed quality assurance systems and the lack of systematic evaluation of adult education and training offers.
3. **Connecting learning spaces** aims to ensure that learning is valued no matter the form of learning (formal, non-formal, informal), place of learning (work, home, education and training providers) or mode of learning (online, in-person, hybrid). It requires strong partnerships and trust between government, social partners and education and training providers. Part of this transformation are measures such as the recognition of prior learning, validation of skills, as well as the certification of small units of learning through badges/micro credentials.

These three big ideas can be used as starting points for policy-makers and practitioners to question the existing structures, processes and interventions in the adult learning space and enable them to use the post-COVID recovery as an opportunity for innovation in adult learning systems.

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