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Participation of the governmental institutions in continuing adult training in Europe.

One of the complexities of adult learning is the sharp policy and implementation divided between formal school-based adult learning and out-of-school adult learning. The two strands of adult learning are governed by different legislations and different ministries, each with their own responsibilities, policies, bodies, institutions and networks.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for education policy for primary and secondary schools (including provision for adults) and the whole of tertiary education, but it shares responsibility with other sector ministries for vocational training, qualifications, programmes and examination requirements. It has its own bodies, institutions and networks (e.g. the National Vocational Training Council; the National Institute for Vocational Education, which maintains the NVQ register; accreditation bodies for the different education sub-sectors; and networks of state schools and universities). The Ministry of Education has the responsibility for coordinating lifelong learning. Separate legislation governs vocational training (including the NVQ register) and higher education.

The Ministry of Employment and Labour is responsible for employment policy, measures to prevent unemployment and the provision of assistance to unemployed people, including training and retraining. It works through the central labour office, which oversees the work of the decentralized networks of county labour offices and councils and nine regional labour force development training centres.

The 2001 Adult Training Act confines the responsibilities of the Ministry of Employment and Labour to out-of-school adult learning. The act has also led to the establishment of new national bodies for out-of-school adult learning. A feature of initial education and training and adult learning is the widespread representation of the social partners in key structures. They are represented on the boards of the Ministry of Employment and Labour's new national adult training bodies, the seven regional training boards, the nine regional training centres and twenty county labour councils. They are also represented on the Ministry of Education's National Vocational Training Council. Employers are represented on examination boards independent of training organizations. Representation and consultation of multi-stakeholder groupings, including associations of employers and employees, chambers and organizations of adult learning providers, are enshrined in law and recognized in practice. However, among those with a stake in adult learning, some are more active than others in shaping policy.

Despite widespread representation of the social partners, decisions taken at national level are influenced primarily by the government. The role played by trade unions is quite weak. Given employers' criticisms of national vocational qualifications, it is clear that the voice of employers and trade unions in decision-

making needs strengthening, so that initial and continuing training programmes respond more accurately to the competence needs of employers and the workforce. The overall impression of adult learning is one of fragmented policies and provision and a lack of connections between its different parts.

The sharp division between school-based and out-of-school adult learning appears to encourage overlaps and competition between different interests. This fragmentation stems from a lack of a lifelong learning policy and strategy that would balance different parts of the system and respond effectively to the needs of different learners.

A survey of participation in adult learning carried out in the second quarter of 2003 found that 20.5% of the population in Europe aged 14-74 had participated in some form of adult education and training in the 12 months preceding the survey. The survey included 14-25 year-olds, many of whom were still in initial education and training, but when these numbers are excluded the average participation rate is only 8.2%. Participation rates are low and they can compare with top EU performers such as Finland, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands.

Many factors – age, gender, labour market status, qualification levels, location, availability of provision and learning mode – influence participation in adult learning. In the survey the average participation rates were highest for young people aged between 15-24 (many still in initial education and training), but participation declined with age. Some 18.2% of participants in Europe were aged 25-34, while only 4.9% of them between 55 and 64. More women than men participated. When young students are excluded, participation rates for employed people were highest (15.9%), followed by those for registered unemployed people (13.6%), but only 4.5% of economically inactive people participated. Participation also increased in line with higher educational attainment levels: 27% of people who had completed secondary school and a similar percentage of people who had a university degree participated, compared to less than 10% of people with grade 8 or less. There were also wide regional variations.

Participation in adult learning is also unequal. Some reviews comment that ‘there is a small group of highly educated people in European countries, mostly young people, who continue to educate themselves and who have access to learning environments at work or in other contexts’. The overall focus is on training provided in formal public education and training institutions or in private ones created for this purpose. It is used predominately by young people without major learning difficulties. Yet, the training needs of many people are not being met, especially among redundant workers, people working in the grey economy and those who are economically inactive, disadvantaged people with lower educational attainment levels, older adults and people living in sparsely populated rural areas. The problem of the low participation of certain segments of the population is recognized, and work is in hand to improve basic skills provision in the school-based system.

Some special support measures for those who are long-term unemployed, older workers and specific groups are arranged through the county labour offices and delivered by the regional training centres. However, some experts commented that

the government has so far done too little to reduce existing gaps in provision and to assist those people who are most in need.

Participation in continuing training in enterprises (2004) found that in 1999 most European countries ranked lowest in terms of the proportion of employed people who participated in continuing training and in the percentage of companies providing training for their employees. In the second EU Continuing Training Survey, which included EU candidate countries, the proportion of enterprises providing continuing training in Hungary in 1999 was 37%, above that of Bulgaria and Romania but much lower than the Czech Republic (69%) and Estonia (63%) (Eurostat, 2002). Participation in training by enterprises is not only low but it is uneven and unequal. There are wide disparities between sectors, enterprises and different categories of workers. The Eurostat survey found that 79% enterprises operating in the financial services sector provided continuing training, compared with only 34% in manufacturing. However, between 2000 and 2002 the numbers doubled and there will have been further increases since then (Zoltán, 2004). Hungarian data on participation confirm general patterns of participation in adult learning in many countries.

Another major gap, and one that has important consequences for future economic development, is the lack of opportunities for adults to acquire higher-level qualifications. Funding for adult learning is linked to the national register of vocational qualifications, which has few higher qualifications. Public funding is limited to training for a first or second labour market qualification in an accredited institution and training for people with disabilities. Universities and other higher education institutions have not fully exploited their potential to provide higher-level adult learning, especially in terms of providing short, professional updating courses. Part of the problem relates to ethos, part to institutional rigidity, and inflexible funding arrangements are also a disincentive.

Participation statistics show that young people who have obtained a first university degree or who have just graduated from secondary school but who cannot find a job immediately form the two largest groups of adult learners. Despite the modernization of vocational training, a proportion of young people continue to train for old profiles that are no longer in demand in the labour market. Skill profiles remain quite narrow, and skill gaps and deficits are serious weaknesses. These problems suggest that initial training has been slow to adjust to the new demands of the market economy (see Zoltán, 2004, amongst others). The remedial function of adult education remains important. It is believed that the immediate need for adult learning in Europe, including many transition countries, stems from a 'persisting mismatch between the demand and supply of skills' as a consequence of transition. This mismatch is further exacerbated by the growing demand for higher-level basic, technical and core skills as the impact of the global knowledge economy grows. This means that the need for work-related adult learning is widespread and not confined to a specific group or to certain sectors.

Second-chance basic and lower secondary adult education designed to compensate adults for previous educational shortfalls is provided by accredited primary and secondary schools under the school-based system. These courses are funded by the

Ministry of Education, directly from school budgets. The users are predominantly young adults with few motivational problems or serious learning difficulties.

Older adults, especially disadvantaged people who arguably need training most, are underrepresented in formal provision. Funding for adult education flows exclusively to accredited state institutions that are closer to hard-to-reach and disadvantaged populations and that are often in a position to be able to respond more flexibly to the learning needs of these groups. This inadvertently works against widening access in adult learning. Funding for adult learning, which is based on a combination of a fixed sum per lesson and per capita funding, is the same for school pupils and adults, and is low. This constrains innovation, the development of adult learning and the recruitment and continuing professional development of teachers of adult learners.

The county labour offices are responsible for training unemployed people through contracts with providers. In response to rising unemployment, the Ministry of Employment and Labour established a network of nine regional labour development and training centres in 1996 with the help of the World Bank and the EU. These not-for-profit training centres play an important role in out-of-school adult learning. They are the main providers of training for both unemployed and employed individuals. They enjoy a market advantage with favourable funding conditions and close links with the labour offices. They have contributed substantially to the development of adult learning through diversifying training offers and responding to different types of learners. The centres are well equipped and offer more individualized services, including information, counseling and guidance. They invest in staff training and research and development. The regional training centres run special programmes for long-term unemployed individuals, including Roma adults who were hit hard by transition and people with disabilities. However, the regional training centres face some uncertainties. Legislative amendments designed to open up competition for labour office contracts has led to a decrease in funding and a reduction in their share of training for unemployed people (which used to be 70%). Despite their good record, programmes for Roma people had had limited success. In part this was a result of cultural differences, but the fact that funding was only available for training was also a factor. This prevented the development of integrated programmes that incorporate training, access to employment and subsidies for food and clothing.

The expansion of continuing training for unemployed people was possible because of social contributions made by employers (3% of labour costs) and employees (1.5% of gross salary) to the employment sub-fund of the Labour Market Fund. Some of these funds are channeled to the county labour offices to finance training for unemployed people and, in some instances, for redundant workers. Funds are also retained centrally to fund organizations and national training programmes (e.g. the 'transit' employment programmes that help certain groups to enter or return to the labour market within six months of completing training, training for small and medium-sized enterprises, social integration programmes and IT training for elderly people).

Employers had to make a huge effort to adapt to the open market in order to survive. This required investment in new plants and technology, new products and services and new work practices.

Underpinning these changes was the need for the workforce to adapt to the demand for new sets of competences and higher-level skills, particularly managerial, technical and core communication and social skills. The more qualified and skilled people found it relatively easy to adapt, but people with poor educational attainment levels and outdated skills found it much harder, and many lost their jobs. Although many companies invest in their workforce, especially in their more skilled workers, the overall participation rate of companies investing in continuing training, although rising, is low. The training levy, which provided funding for reforms to initial training, did not provide much incentive for enterprises to invest in their workforce, and there is a major mismatch between public financial support for initial training for young people and continuing training for adults. The European levy scheme is not a 'train or pay' scheme, such as those in France and Australia, where companies can use up to the full amount of the levy to train their own employees. Enterprises in Europe can retain a maximum of only a third of their contribution of 1.5% of payroll costs and small enterprises find the amount insufficient to cover their training costs.

The initial period of exponential growth in adult learning outside the school system was described as 'chaotic': it was unregulated, and had little transparency or quality control. It was also difficult to recognize the plethora of certificates issued by private providers. Adult learning opportunities were unevenly distributed, participation was low and training needs were not being met. In the late 1990s, as the policy priority of adult learning increased, European policymakers started work on new legislation. After extensive debate among key ministries and stakeholders including the social partners and the public, the 2001 Adult Training Act came into effect in January 2002. The act provided a major boost to adult learning, but its focus was on adult training outside the school system, thereby maintaining the divide between school-based and out-of-school provision. The Adult Training Act delegates most responsibilities to the Ministry of Employment and Labour, but other ministries also have a role. New institutions and new funding mechanisms

The Adult Training Act set up new national institutions (e.g. the National Adult Training Council, the National Adult Training Institute and an Adult Training Accreditation body) under the Ministry of Employment and Labour to develop adult learning and raise quality. It introduced new funding mechanisms, which came into force on 1 January 2003. Direct public funding is limited and is channeled to institutions under normative per capita funding to enable adults to acquire up to a second-level labour market qualification. It funds training programmes that facilitate employment and programmes for people with disabilities. Indirect funding takes the form of a tax allowance of up to €250 which individual tax-payers can offset against their annual tax liability. This too is limited to training that leads to a registered qualification or to an accredited programme that takes place in an accredited institution. The tax allowance also covers the purchase of a personal computer.

Following the period of unregulated growth in adult training, it was important to develop measures to increase transparency, quality control and the efficient use of public funding in non-formal learning. Processes were introduced to register and accredit institutions. Good progress has been made in accrediting institutions, with over 800 already accredited. Accreditation brings providers several benefits. Accredited institutions have the right to access norm-based funding and to participate in public tenders to upgrade infrastructure and equipment, and individual students of these institutions are eligible for tax allowances.

A second accreditation process has recently been introduced for programmes, with the aim of allowing training providers to respond to the demand for shorter training courses and for skills that are not included in the qualifications listed in the NVQ register.

Accreditation is largely a self-assessment process based on the scrutiny of documents submitted by providers to the accreditation body. The system ensures certain standards of facilities, training and support services. It has to some extent regulated the market and is accepted broadly by public and private providers. Yet, there were criticisms that the accreditation processes were superficial, bureaucratic, not sufficiently objective and open to provider influence.

One private provider felt that the process did not take account of the extent to which training actually responded to market needs. The processes also appear to favour larger organizations that had the funds and resources to comply with administrative requirements. The review team thought that the two-tier system was likely to be confusing for developers, learners and employers and that two sets of administrative procedures added to the costs. What is not clear in the accreditation processes for institutions and programmes is the extent to which these lead to a systematic review, adjustment and development of programmes and form part of a strategic planning cycle.

The Adult Training Act (2001) specifically requires providers to assess the prior learning and experience of adults, but as yet there is no unified system for doing so. The use of new assessment methods is not common practice and there is no independent mechanism for assessing people's competences. Adults are unable to reduce the time spent in learning by following only relevant modules because there is no scope for them to obtain partial qualifications. They have to meet formal entrance requirements in full. These difficulties are barriers that can discourage adults from participating in learning.