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## **Adult education and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic: An international perspective**

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**Abstract** The COVID-19 pandemic has caused one of the worst economic crises since the Great Depression. Although countries responded quickly to support displaced workers with assistance packages and funding for education and training, additional measures might be needed. Each country's economic recovery will most likely depend on how well its workforce is prepared to meet the needs of the changed labor market. Providing workers with opportunities to upskill or reskill is of major importance in meeting these challenges and improving low- and middle-skilled workers' reemployment prospects. This qualitative study examines measures taken in response to COVID-19 in adult education and training (AET) in seven countries. The findings are based on key informant interviews with international experts and online sources they provided. Some countries have increased government funding for vocational and continuing education or offered financial support for post-secondary students while others have provided funds to employers to offer training and retraining for their employees.

**Key words** COVID-19; adult education; adult training; vocational education; unemployment; qualitative research

### **Background**

The novel coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) has become the most serious pandemic in a century with over 64.5 million confirmed cases and over 1.5 million deaths worldwide (as of 12/4/20) (World Health Organization, 2020). COVID-19 has also contributed to one of the worst economic crises since the Great Depression of 1929 (OECD, 2020a). The Organization for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported the May 2020 average unemployment rate for its member countries at 8.4%, up from 5.2% in February (OECD, 2020a). In the U.S., the unemployment rate increased from 3.5% to 13.3% between February and May of 2020. Canada experienced similar increases in unemployment to the U.S. (OECD, 2020b). These rates were higher than previous historical peaks. Further, the OECD predicts that a jobs recovery may not occur until after 2021 (OECD, 2020a).

Many countries responded quickly to support the unemployed and those who experienced reduced working hours with assistance packages, such as increased unemployment benefits, relaxed unemployment regulations, and increased support for education and training (OECD, 2020a). However, as countries begin to lift containment policies and reopen their economies, additional support will be needed. Some companies were already moving toward increased automation and digitalization in the workplace, and the speed of these efforts is anticipated to increase due to COVID-19, likely reducing the number of low- and middle-skilled jobs available as citizens attempt to return to work (Chernoff and Warman, 2020; Muro, 2020). Therefore, to become reemployed, some adults might require training in a different occupation (Boeren, Roumell, and Roessger, 2020).

## The research study

This research note draws on the qualitative findings from a mixed-method study to examine current policies and practices for adult education and lifelong learning along with participation rates in adult learning activities in different countries. The quantitative portion of the project used data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) to examine variations in participation in adult learning. For the qualitative portion of the project, we conducted key informant interviews with international policy experts and scholars in the field of adult education and training (AET). We interviewed five to seven key informants per country in Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, the U.K., Australia, Singapore, Canada, and the U.S. for a total of 60 interviews. These countries were selected because they participated in PIAAC and for their

commitment to lifelong learning (Desjardins and Rubenson, 2013). Interviews were conducted via video conferencing, and all were recorded and transcribed. We used applied thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012) to examine the interview data.

This research note focuses on the specific AET measures undertaken in seven of these countries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted 18 interviews after the beginning of the pandemic, between March and July of 2020. In addition to the original interview questions, we asked key informants about the specific actions taken by their governments and other organizations to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. Since not all the interviews rendered the specific information we were seeking, we reached out to the key informants we had interviewed earlier for their insights on the topic. Several key informants provided us with online sources for the information about their countries' responses. These details are also included in the findings.

## Findings

The COVID-related AET measures are presented below by country. Funding allocations are reported in local currency along with approximate conversions to U.S. dollars.

### Sweden: Additional funding for vocational education

In Sweden, the government increased funding for adult education, especially for vocational courses. One key informant considers it a way of keeping people from unemployment. When asked if there have been budget cuts in Sweden due to COVID-19, she commented:

Not in higher education. I do think it's the opposite here actually, that they see it as a way of handling unemployment. It has been a brilliant strategy, a national strategy every time the economy goes down, they are putting money into the educational system so people will have something to do so they don't have to pay an unemployment fee.

### Norway: Expansion of industry programs

Key informants from Norway reported a range of measures in adult education implemented by the state in response to COVID-19. The Norwegian government set aside one billion kroner (approximately US\$109 million) for education and training. Free courses are offered to unemployed

and employees on leave to upgrade their skills while the economy is down. This is done through industry programs financed by the government. Under these programs, employers and unions in each industry assess their skill needs and work with education providers to organize training courses. Industries which have been affected the most, such as tourism, restaurant, hospitality, transportation, and which have the largest share of low-skilled workers, were previously excluded from such programs. However, in response to COVID-19, the programs have been expanded to include these industries, and now their employees can participate in formal education and training. For furloughed workers, the purpose of the training is to return to the job they had before the crisis. For example, one key informant observed:

Of course, restructuring will take place and some people will not go back to their old job, but mostly people will want to build on the skill set that they have already acquired as part of their working life, so most will, I think, try to stay within the industry that they're already employed in.

Special packages have been launched with measures to help those who have not completed their upper secondary education (i.e., high school) or want to complete their vocational education. Counties, which are responsible for the provision of these services in Norway, will receive money from the state to offer vocational education and training. Trade certificates will be awarded to those who complete the training.

### Singapore: Increases in continuing education credits

In Singapore there has been an increase in the SkillsFuture credit for continuing education. SkillsFuture was created in 2015 to integrate and consolidate all the schemes and campaigns for lifelong learning into one framework. SkillsFuture supports training for adults ages 25 and over by providing S\$500 (US\$360) credits to each citizen or permanent resident to fund their training and education (Woo, 2017). This year, as a response to COVID-19, the credit amount has been increased by S\$500 for a total of S\$1000 (US\$720). Furthermore, mid-career workers in their 40s

and 50s will receive additional S\$500 this year for a total of S\$1500 (US\$1,085) per person. One key informant explained:

We realized that people were going to get laid off. There was nothing to do then because business was not going to be offering. The government decided that you need to keep money for people to retrain. They had this narrative going on that this pandemic would go away, and we will all come out of this with new skills, hopefully.

### The Netherlands: Support for continued training and retraining

To receive financial assistance from the government, employers are required to encourage their employees to continue training and retraining to be able to adapt to a new economic situation. To help with these efforts the government set aside an additional 50 million euros (US\$58 million) for the crisis program “NL continues to learn” (Government of the Netherlands, 2020). In addition, the free career counseling program for workers ages 45 and over, which was originally closed at the end of 2019, has been reopened in response to COVID-19. It consists of six meetings and aims to improve mobility and labor market prospects for older workers.

### Australia: Investments in skills upgrades and apprenticeships

A new billion-dollar skills investment program, JobTrainer, was announced. It aims to help those seeking employment in high-demand sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing, and trade to upskill or reskill. It is financed by both the federal government and participating states and territories. It is anticipated that 340,000 training locations will be created by the program (Australian Government, 2020a). Apprenticeships are another area in which the government is investing money. In addition to a A\$1.3 billion (US\$924 million) stimulus program that was launched earlier, a A\$1.5 billion (US\$1.1 billion) additional investment was announced. The money will subsidize 50% of trainees’ and apprentices’ wages up to A\$7,000 (US\$5,000) per quarter for those who were employed on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 (Australian Government, 2020b).

### Canada: Reimbursement of employers’ training costs

In Canada, measures have been implemented at a provincial rather than a national level. For example, the Canada-Alberta Job Grant allows employers in Alberta to apply for eligible training expenses for their employees. It is up to the employer to decide who will participate and what type of training is needed. The employers' minimum contribution is one-third of the total training costs for current employees. The rest is covered by the government with a maximum of C\$10,000 (US\$7,450) per trainee per year. In the case of training an unemployed individual, the government may cover 100% of the costs or up to C\$15,000 (US\$11,200) per person (Government of Alberta, 2020).

A similar grant program for reimbursing employers' training expenses during COVID-19 was announced in Quebec in April. Under this program, up to C\$100,000 (US\$74,530) of the eligible training costs will be covered for employers affected by the pandemic (KPMG, 2020). Some of the types of training covered by the program include basic employee and digital skills training and continuing education, even if they are not directly related to the employee's current position.

#### United States: Free courses and support for post-secondary students

In the United States, the government and individual companies and organizations have adopted policies and practices to support individuals returning to work. Almost US\$250 million (as of 9/29/20) in Dislocated Worker Grants (DWGs) were awarded to states, outlying areas, and Indian tribal governments which may be used to provide employment and training services for dislocated workers and the unemployed (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Several companies and organizations, including Microsoft and Goodwill, have announced they are offering free courses to help people develop needed skills (Goodwill, 2020; Smith, 2020). Microsoft is focusing on the technical skills needed to secure employment in automated and digitalized working environments (Smith, 2020).

The U.S., along with most, if not all, OECD countries in the European Union (EU), moved to remote learning for post-secondary education. This change highlighted, and increased, the need for social support for adult learners (e.g., transportation, food and shelter assistance, childcare, mental health services, etc.). To help support post-secondary students, the U.S. Department of Education

reports that student loan payments can be placed on hold, and the interest will be waived for a period of time during the pandemic (Federal Student Aid, 2020; National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2020). Further, academic institutions and foundations are raising and distributing funds to support students who are in-need (College Futures Foundation, 2020; The Leadership Brainery, 2020).

## Conclusion

This study explored measures taken in response to COVID-19 in the area of adult education and training in seven countries. Some countries, including Sweden, Norway, Singapore, and the U.S. have increased government funding for vocational and continuing education courses or offered financial support for post-secondary students. Other countries, including the Netherlands, Australia, and Canada, have provided funds to employers to offer training and retraining for their employees or invested in apprenticeship programs. Overall, it appears that the countries we examined understand that their economic recovery will partially depend on how well their workforce is prepared to meet the needs of the changed labor market post-pandemic. Therefore, these countries invest in upskilling, reskilling or continuing education to expedite their economic recovery while also improving reemployment prospects for middle- and low-skilled workers.

Additional research should consider these findings in the broader context of adult education and lifelong learning policies and practices countries had in place prior to the pandemic. For example, Nordic countries are well known for providing no- or low-cost opportunities for AET (Rubenson, 2006) and the U.S. funds training through Pell grants and Workforce Investment Opportunity Act adult and dislocated worker programs (Eberts, 2019). Finally, future research should investigate the long-term viability of the discussed measures for improving and expanding adult educational opportunities post-pandemic.

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