

Adult Education and Training Programs for Older Adults in the U.S.: National Results and Cross-National Comparisons Using PIAAC Data

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Continuous learning over the life course is necessary to effectively compete in a knowledge-based global economy. Shifts in the age structure of the U.S. labor force combined with increased labor force participation among older adults add to the importance of gaining a good understanding of how adult education and training (AET) influences labor market outcomes for middle-aged and older workers. This study used data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) to examine the relationship between participation in AET programs and employment, labor force participation, income, and net worth for adults aged 45 to 65 in the U.S. Participation in an AET program in the 12 months preceding the survey significantly improved the log odds of both employment and labor force participation and significantly improved the log odds of moving up one income quintile. Lower income groups and the unemployed were less likely to participate in AET than higher income groups and the employed. Females and those with lower levels of education were more likely to have poorer outcomes in employment, labor force participation, and income as compared to males and the more highly educated. Non-participation by lower-income groups and females may result from lack of affordability and lack of knowledge about the benefits of continuous learning over the life course. Affordable AET opportunities for low-income groups and females might increase participation rates and improve labor market outcomes. Outreach programs that inform individuals about the benefits of AET participation and flexible scheduling, including evening and distance learning programs, might also increase participation among all income groups.

We also compared outcomes of AET participation in the U.S. with those in Germany, Japan, Sweden, and the U.K. and examined policies for lifelong learning in those countries. Each country recognizes the need for individuals to remain in the labor force at older ages and also the importance of lifelong learning to maintain a skilled workforce. Consistent with the U.S., lower-income groups are less likely to participate in adult education programs as compared to higher income groups. Implementing programs that facilitate AET participation by lower income groups has generally been a challenge for policy makers.

Policies that provide opportunities for older adults to participate in AET programs are necessary to ensure economic security in retirement, a competitive labor force, and economic growth. Implementation of policies that focus on lower income groups and the unemployed, who are likely the most in need of skill upgrades and most at risk for economic insecurity in retirement, are especially important. This will likely involve additional funding for public programs, such as the Senior Community Services Employment Program (SCSEP) or the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Outreach programs are necessary to provide unemployed workers a better understanding of the importance of remaining in the labor force to ensure financial security in retirement. Examples of policies to encourage participation in AET include tax credits for AET expenses, lifelong learning accounts, incumbent worker training programs, and publicly sponsored training programs for low-income and unemployed workers. Policies that support a shared responsibility by the government, the individual, and employers are key but how the costs are shared needs to vary by income level so the most in need have low- or no-cost opportunities for AET.