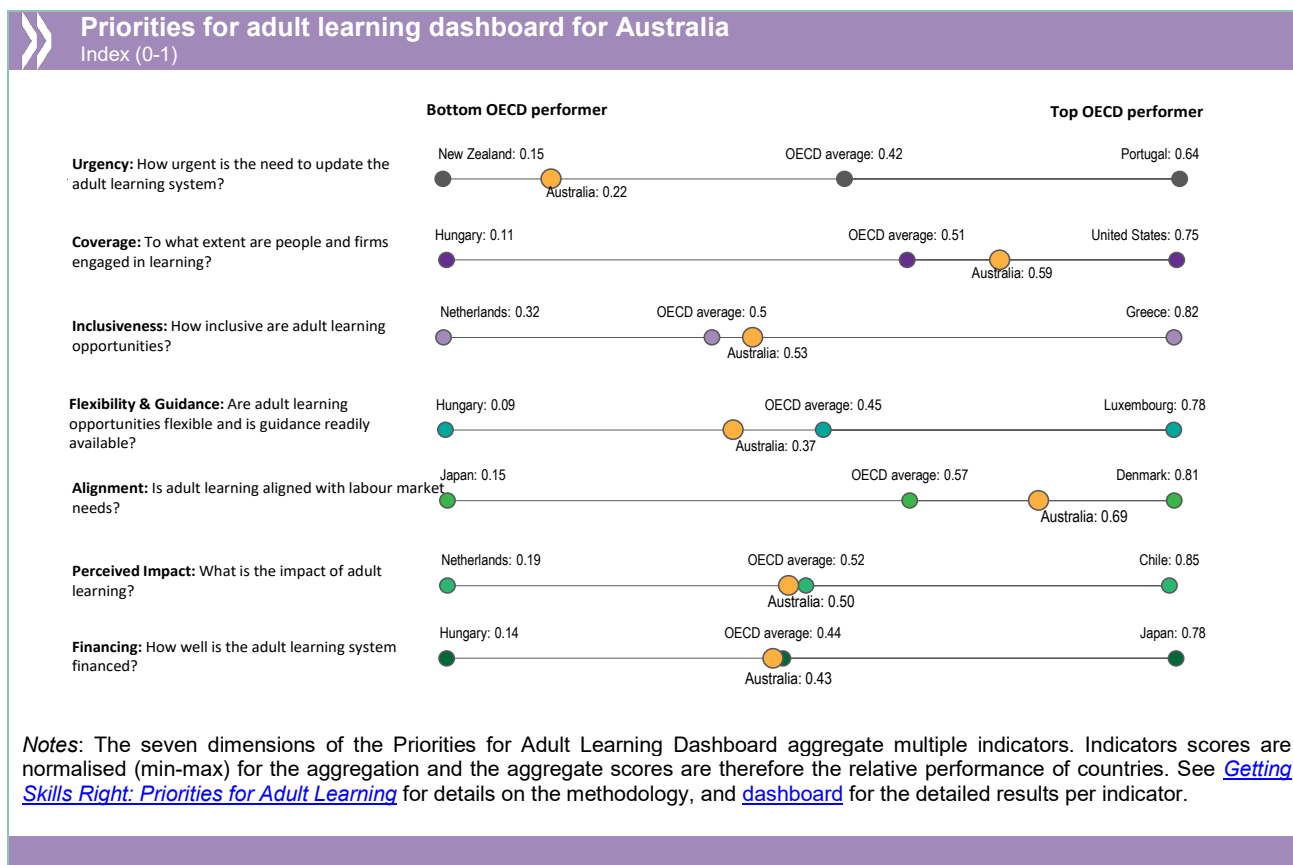


How future-ready is Australia’s adult learning system?

The world of work is changing. Digitalisation, globalisation and population ageing are having a profound impact on the type and quality of jobs that are available and the skills needed to perform them. The extent to which individuals, firms and economies can reap the benefits of these changes will depend critically on the readiness of adult learning systems to help people develop and maintain relevant skills over their working careers. To explore this issue, the OECD has developed a new [dashboard on Priorities for Adult Learning \(PAL\)](#) for comparing the readiness of each country’s adult learning system to address future skill challenges.

OECD Priorities for Adult Learning dashboard

The dashboard compares the future-readiness of countries’ adult learning systems in seven dimensions: i) urgency, ii) coverage, iii) inclusiveness, iv) flexibility and guidance, v) alignment with skill needs, vi) perceived training impact, and vii) financing. The dashboard focuses on adult learning that is job-related, i.e. adult education and training that is expected to have some effect on performance and productivity at work.



Australia’s PAL results

Structural changes are putting Australia’s adult learning system under mounting strain, although less so than in most other OECD countries. Australia is a strong commodity exporter but still less exposed to international trade than many other OECD countries. Hence, it is also less exposed to the changes in skill demand that comes with stronger integration into global

value-chains. Population ageing is also putting less pressure on the system than in many other countries. The old-age dependency ratio is projected to rise from 23% in 2015 to 37% in 2050 – a much smaller increase than in most other countries.

Australia also faces a somewhat smaller challenge than some other countries in ensuring that all adults have a minimum level of basic skills. The share of adults with

poor cognitive skills is below the OECD average. Nevertheless, more than one-in-five Australians can at most complete very simple reading and/or mathematical tasks, such as reading brief texts on familiar topics or understanding basic percentages. Upskilling them will be crucial to maintaining and increasing Australia's competitiveness.

According to the Priorities for Adult Learning dashboard, Australia performs around the OECD average in the dimensions of inclusiveness, impact and financing. It performs above average in terms of coverage: according to the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), 48% of adults participated in job-related adult learning during a 12-month period compared with the OECD average of 40%. However, this share drops to 23% for low-skilled adults and to 32% for older adults aged 55 and over. National data sources suggest that overall participation has decreased in recent years. One of the key obstacles to training can be a lack of flexibility in the training offered, as well as a lack of guidance services. Concerning flexibility, only 11% of learners participated in distance learning, well below the OECD average of 19%. Unfortunately, there is no comparative data on the coverage of career guidance services for Australia.

Australia scores relatively well in the area of alignment with labour market needs, but this is based on limited comparative data for the country. Australia is one of the few OECD countries where workers are more likely to participate in training when they are working in surplus occupations, i.e. occupations where the supply of workers exceeds demand, than in shortage occupations. This is positive, if this training enables them to transition into new careers through upskilling and reskilling.

Future-ready adult learning policies

Australia has put in place several policy initiatives to ensure that adults have (equal) access to high-quality training opportunities that are well aligned with labour market needs. These include:

- *Coverage and inclusiveness:* To address the participation gap of mature workers, Australia is currently trialling the *Career Transition Assistance* programme for job seekers aged 50 and older. Initially planned as a two-year trial in five regions, the programme will be rolled out nation-wide in July 2019. The programme combines tailored career assistance and functional digital literacy training using different types of technology.
- *Alignment:* Australia's *Structural Adjustment Packages (SAPs)* support workers in areas where expectations of future employment are low. A *Stronger Transitions Package* was introduced in 2018 to support individuals in five regions impacted by structural change in the transition to new jobs and prepare for the jobs of the future. The package includes a Pre-retrenchment Skills and Training Support measure, which provides targeted services, including: comprehensive skills assessments; job search preparation; resilience training; language, literacy and numeracy support; digital literacy training; financial management information; exploring self-employment options; health and wellbeing support, and industry awareness experiences.

The OECD report [Getting Skills Right: Future-ready adult learning systems](#) provides a wide range of good practice policy examples from OECD and non-OECD countries that could serve as inspiration for Australia to improve further the future-readiness of its adult learning system.

What can policy makers do?

- ▶ *Improve the coverage of adult learning* by raising awareness among adults and employers about the benefits of training, and helping them make informed training choices.
- ▶ *Reduce barriers to training participation*, by making opportunities more flexible and adapted to the needs of adult learners, including through the provision of distance, part-time and modular learning opportunities.
- ▶ *Set-up advice and guidance services for adult learning* geared towards long-term outcomes and reduce disincentives employment service providers face in offering training to job seekers;
- ▶ *Make use of digital technologies to deliver training* and their potential to deliver education to remote communities.
- ▶ *Put in place adequate and sustainable financing*, including through public funding and incentives for employers and individuals to contribute.

Further reading in the "Getting Skills Right" series:

[Future-ready adult learning systems](#)
[Engaging low-skilled adults in learning](#)
[Creating responsive adult learning systems](#)
[Making adult learning work in social partnership](#)
[Getting Skills Right Australia](#)

Data

Explore the [Priorities for Adult Learning dashboard](#)

Contact

Anja Meierkord – Labour Market Economist
✉ anja.meierkord@oecd.org ☎ +33 1 85 55 64 73

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