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OECD	organisation for economic cooperation and development
■ CSC	commission syndicale consultative auprès de
OCDE	l'organisation de coopération et de développement économiques

Urgently needed: Improved access to post-school education and training

Policy makers, trade union leaders and employers all agree that education is the key to participation in the global economy of the 21st century. With regard to opportunities and risks linked to globalization, high quality education is more relevant than ever in seeking to build societies that are fair and just for all their citizens, that respect universal values of democracy and human rights, and whose development - social as well as economic - will be equitable and sustainable. In order to achieve these goals, the development of high quality education systems in all countries, the expansion of school and vocational education as well as of higher education and continuous vocational training, is an essential precondition. Regrettably, however, the gap between educational policy rhetoric and reality has not been bridged sufficiently; many governments have failed to provide the necessary resources required to build and maintain high quality education systems and to tackle issues regarding inequality of access to education and training. This has been revealed by the 2005 issue of “*Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators*”, which looks at who participates in education, what is spent on it and how education systems operate, and at the results achieved.

According to the comparative statistics provided by the OECD, educational attainment continues to grow among the adult population of OECD countries. This applies to upper secondary education as well as increasingly to tertiary completion rates. It is also good news that in many countries females are completing both upper secondary and tertiary education at faster rates than males. However, it must be noted that participation and completion rates vary substantially between countries.

Regrettably, however, good news on educational attainment is accompanied by bad news regarding spending on education as well as participation in continuing education and training. All OECD countries invest a substantial proportion of national resources in education; as a whole they spend 6.1 % of their collective GDP on educational institutions. Public spending on educational institutions increased between 1995 and 2002 by more than 5%. However, the increase in spending on education over that period did not keep pace with the growth in national income in a large number of OECD countries. In some countries, among them Ireland, Spain, Austria and others, the proportion of GDP spent on education decreased by 0.4 % or more between 1995 and 2002. A particularly striking development is the decrease of public spending per student in tertiary education. And a cause of serious concern is the fact that tertiary institutions are now relying more heavily on private sources of funding than ever before. About 80 % of these private funds are already covered by households. The fact that graduating is becoming more expensive and no longer automatically guarantees a top job and a lot more pay, as well as difficulties to find a suitable job after graduation, the risk of being overburdened with debt while studying, in addition to long periods of loan repayment may discourage students from choosing their graduation path according to their interest, rather than by criteria of affordability.

A further cause of serious concern is the fact that many employees are facing growing pressures to go on developing skills and knowledge over the course of their working life at a time when job tasks become more complex and job mobility increases. It is very disappointing that in more than ten OECD countries less than 20 % of the labour force has participated in some type of non-formal job-related continuing education and training within a 12 month period. The same applies to the fact that continuing training tends to reinforce existing skill differences resulting from unequal access to and participation in education in all countries; less-educated workers in most countries are significantly less likely to be trained. And in almost all countries, training participation is significantly higher for those in employment than for the unemployed.

It is against this background that TUAC welcomes the OECD's call to governments to do more to foster education and training at all stages of people's lives.

Governments must design and implement education policies in order to

- increase the level of investment in human resources, because failure to invest in education and training costs more in the long run;
- maintain and strengthen the role of public educational institutions and encourage them to promote democracy, good governance, participatory development and human rights;
- strengthen equal opportunities by contributing to the closure of gender gaps in education, training and employment;
- foster agreements between employers and trade unions that make participation in lifelong learning feasible in practice.

In recent years, trade unions, realizing the problems caused for their members by lack of skills and competencies, have worked to develop broader access to learning for employees. We now put learning and the development skills at the top of our agendas. We negotiate training agreements with employers, raise members' awareness of learning, advise learner members and help to broker the provision of education and training with colleges and universities. Union representatives are being trained and accredited as "learning representatives". Much innovative work is being done but much more is needed if lifelong learning is to be made a reality. We argue that there is a need for individual entitlements to access foundation levels of learning and skills, and for employers to be given obligations and incentives to provide such opportunities.

Further information on **Education at a Glance 2005** can be found at <http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2005>, as can country chapters (on France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, the United Kingdom and the United States).