# Foreword

**by *Andreas Schleicher****

We used to learn to do the work, now learning has become our work. The faster the world changes, the less we can rely on what we studied early in our lives, and the more we need to develop not just the skills but also the motivation, the strategies and the behaviors to continue to learn, to unlearn and relearn.

We easily associate poor adult skills with the developing world. But data showed how prevalent it is even in the world's most advanced economies. According to OECD's Survey of Adult Skills, one in five American adults struggle with the literacy skills we

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would expect from a 10-year-old child. We all know the consequences. Without the right skills, people are kept on the margins of society, technological progress does not translate into economic growth, and countries can't compete in today's economies.

It is easy to position continuous learning as a tool to help those who struggled to catch up and participate meaningfully in modern societies. But the data show the opposite. In general, it is those who did well in school who continue learning throughout life, while those who need continuous learning most get the least of it. It is not so difficult to understand why. Those who struggled in school will be less inclined to go back to schools, and employers are less inclined to invest in those who offer the least returns. We need to reverse this or we will see adult skills polarize our societies further. Polarization in the skills of our populations will be driving polarization in our economies, our labor-markets, our societies and our democracies.

In countries with rapidly improving school systems the intergenerational skills gap can be particularly large. Everyone praises Singapore for an excellent school system. However, Singapore has done much less to help older people catch up, so today Singapore has one of the largest intergenerational skills gaps.

There are many countries that need to do better to enhance the opportunities for continuous learning. However, that is only half the truth. When we surveyed adults why they did not participate in continuous learning, an average of 60% said because they would not need it. While we need to address the economic barriers to continuous learning and provide better opportunities, we also need to tackle the barriers in mindset and the nature of continuous learning opportunities, that still associate learning with sitting in school rather than with self-directed lifelong and lifewide learning. This book explains how this can be achieved.

The bottom line is that too many people are trapped in rigid degree and qualification systems and those who did not go to school or college rarely get a chance to catch up. Even if they have great skills, they often cannot put them to good use because they have not received the credentials to signal their skills. We need to tackle the monopolistic culture of formal education and give people much greater ownership over what they learn, how they learn, where they learn and when in their lives they learn to develop and advance their skills. And we need to become much better at recognizing the skills of people by looking beyond paper certificates.

Finally, OECD data also show that skills development is far more effective when the world of learning and the world of work are integrated. Compared to purely government-designed curricula taught exclusively in schools, learning in the workplace allows people to develop "hard" skills on modern equipment, and "soft" skills, such as teamwork, communication and negotiation, through real-world experience. Hands-on workplace training can also help to motivate disengaged youth to stay in or re-engage with education and smoothen the transition to work.

The social partners can make a big contribution to developing curricula that include broader, transferable skills and to ensure that good-quality training is available to all.

We need to deal with the tough question of who should pay for what, when and how, particularly for learning beyond school. Often employers can do more to create a climate that supports learning, and invest in learning. In this century, great places of work are great places of learning. And great places of learning are very good at anticipating the evolution of skill demand. Some individuals can shoulder more of the financial burden, particularly those who already have high levels of education. Governments can do a lot to design more rigorous standards, provide financial incentives and create better safety nets so that all people have access to high quality learning. So, again, what can we do about this?

Quality career guidance is essential: people who have the latest labor-market information can help steer individuals to the education or training that would best prepare them for their prospective careers.

Helping young people to gain a foothold in the labor market is fundamental. And, again, this is not necessarily a question of formal qualifications. In some parts of the world better formal qualifications are even associated with higher unemployment.

Coherent and easy-to-understand qualifications are important to help employers identify potential employees who are suitable for the jobs they offer. Imagine you are highly skilled but nobody knows about this. That's the problem of many workers today. We need to replace or at least complement lumpy formal degrees and qualifications with stackable and transferrable micro-credentials that pay less attention to where you studied, and more attention to what you actually know and can do.

Last but not least, education that fosters entrepreneurship helps create jobs. And again, good education and training are where entrepreneurship is born.

In short, there is much we can do to help adults develop the right skills and turn them into better jobs and better lives.

This book will help those who design or manage learning experiences to adapt them to the needs of the 21st century.