Over the last two or three decades, economic and social development has been marked by a number of important changes. These changes have transformed significantly the way we learn, work, combine work with family life, retire, age and organize our various commitments throughout the life-cycle. Thus they have transformed our lives and the way we think, even if most people and workers are perhaps largely unaware of them. As a result, our modern society is more dynamic, more flexible, more unstable and requires new solutions to current and future problems. A proper understanding of the changes is essential as we prepare to work longer and retire later and more flexibly. We shall see that they often constitute opportunities for extension of work-life. This chapter will describe and analyse five distinct areas: the new life-cycle, training and education through life, a new definition of old age, active ageing and the need for a transition between work and retirement.

The new life-cycle

A new activity pattern

Observation of change in our modern societies reveals that the work life-cycle which was traditionally divided into three periods – training, work and retirement – has altered significantly in recent years. We find that today continuous training is often a standard feature of the workplace. Career interruptions due to unemployment or a change in occupation and/or employer (a second or third career) are now commonplace. Women, and increasingly men, who cease working or work less in order to raise young children, will often return to the workforce after a period which might include retraining or the updating of skills. Nowadays many retired people spend time with their families or doing voluntary work, but even so some continue, or would like to continue, doing professional work. It is our life-cycle that is changing, then, and the compartmentalization of work-life into three age-based vertical periods is gradually giving way to a horizontal arrangement which is more in tune with the realities of modern economic, social and family life – a
life pattern that is at once more diversified, more flexible, and more dynamic and where responsibilities and benefits are more evenly apportioned between men and women. Figure 2.1 summarizes this new life-cycle which most of us are now experiencing or envisage for the future.

Figure 2.1  Evolution of life-cycle or age-based distribution of activities


**Lifetime allocation of labour and leisure across OECD countries**

In the OECD in 2000, men worked on average 55% of their lifetime, spent 26% in childhood and education before entering the labour force, and 18% in retirement. These proportions vary widely, however, from country to country. They are below average for work in continental Europe (France, Germany, Italy) and in Eastern European countries (Hungary, Poland). Countries with above-average lifetime activity rates include the United States, Japan and some European countries (such as Iceland, Portugal, Ireland, Denmark and Switzerland). Women worked proportionally less than men, but the ranking of women’s lifetime activity rates across countries is similar to that of men (Figure 2.2).

During the past decades, lifetime allocation of labour and leisure has changed substantially. The proportion of lifetime that men dedicate to work has declined in all OECD countries. Part of the explanation for this decline is quite simply the increase in life expectancy. But in many countries also, this trend has been reinforced by a lowering of the effective average age of retirement (for example, France, Germany). This reduction of the working time proportion for men has been accompanied by an important increase in the proportion spent in retirement (see Figure 2.2).