Delivering quality education to rural regions

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Innovative Service Delivery: Meeting the Challenges of Rural Regions

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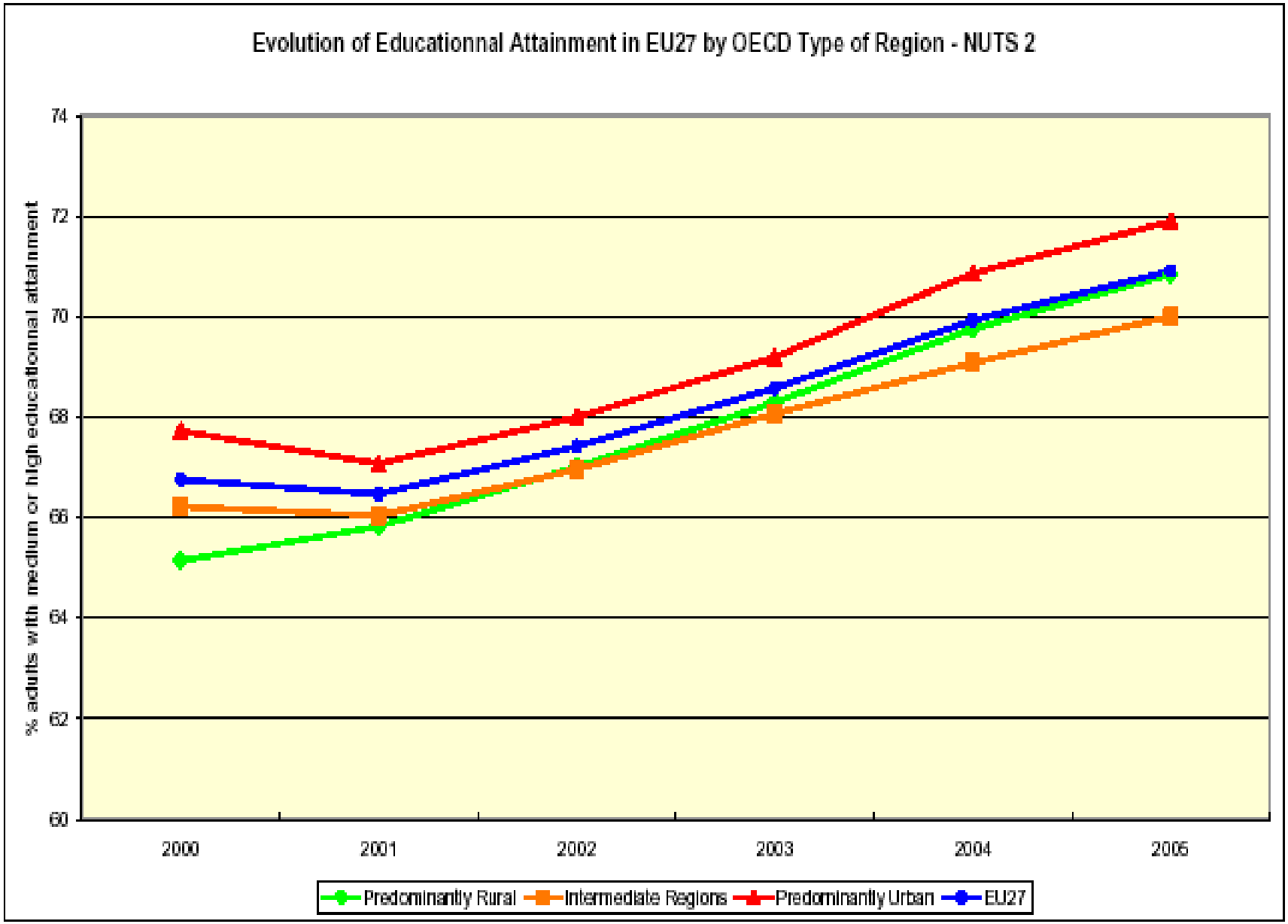
Contents

- State of Play (EU countries)
- Education and training delivery: scope and mode
- E&T: quantity and quality issues
- Some examples of innovation
- Delivering quality education: the way forwards
- Conclusions

1a. State of play: reducing disparities between rural and urban areas

- Educational attainment (% of adults with Medium or High education) in predominantly rural (PR) and intermediate regions (IR) (OECD definition) shows narrowing gaps in relation to predominantly urban regions (PU); this has been a continuous trend in ‘80s and ‘90s
  - Northern Europe and some new Member States have narrow educational gaps (FR, NL, FI, IE, BE, PL, CZ, HU) (< 10 points difference) and some show higher levels of education in rural than in urban areas (UK, DE, AT)
  - Widest gaps are found in Mediterranean countries where significant rural-urban gaps are still found (GR, ES, IT, PT) internally and with EU average (> 20 points difference; EU 26 70.95%)

Graph 3.5.10


Evolution of Educationnal Attainment in EU27 by OECD Type of Region - NUTS 2
% adults with medium or high educationnal attainment
74
72
70
68
66
64
62
60
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
Predominantly Rural
Intermediate Regions
Predominantly Urban
EU27

1b.State of Play: life-long learning (adult vocational and ad hoc training)

- % of adults participating in education and training is relatively modest (EU25 almost 12%) and does not show significant gaps between rural and urban areas
- Differences are between countries which support adult training (DK, ES, NL, AT, SL, SK, SE, UK) in general and those who do so more modestly
- Trends indicate an increase in participation slightly more significant in rural areas than in urban ones (+ 3.2% vs +2.9% in EU15)

1c. State of play: a preliminary appraisal

- A simple ratio of schools to school-age children does not reveal much rural-urban variation, since basic education has been a public service provided to all in most European countries (also in Eastern European countries)
- Distance to universities (mostly located in urban areas) has not proven to be a major barrier to higher education, however, proximity increases access by rural dwellers.
- Higher levels of education are well diversified and not related to the weight or influence of agricultural activities.
- Travelling; not contextualized, not integrated orientations; narrow and sparse range of options, at higher secondary education level, would seem to be the most serious constraints faced by school age children in rural areas.
- Pre-school childcare provision, being non statutory, suggests the existence of much wider gaps between rural and urban areas.
- Trends indicate a “catching up” of rural areas in last 20 years coinciding with the process of diversification of rural economies
- Two situations can be recognized: without and without disparities

2a. Education delivery: scope and mode

Basic, formal education: a vertical “silo”:

- nationally conceived with a sector logic, “guaranteeing” minimum standards, universalistic in scope, ensuring equal access opportunities, investing in human capital for modern economies/societies independently of local conditions (equalizing drive, provide labour force for industrialization, accompany rural exodus)
- Its major achievement has been to extend basic education in rural areas as a national, top down policy
- Its weaknesses have been its uniformity, the rigidity of supply (lack of adaptation to changes in demand) and separateness from other rural services and specific needs; its high costs in sparsely populated areas with out-migration, its initial emphasis on agricultural education, its relatively lower quality.

2b. Training delivery: innovative experiences

- Training has played a complementary role to formal education in rural areas, allowing for some contextualization and integration of provision
- Ad hoc training has flourished since the ‘90s and has played a major role in addressing the weaknesses of basic education;
- Innovation has followed a territorial, local development, partnership approach, adapted to changing demand and combining the old and new functions of rural economies.
- New and more flexible modes of delivery have been introduced (in outlets, type of settlement, timing and duration, governance)

2c. E&T delivery: quantity issues

- Rural areas have lost population and this has implied declining number of children of school-age, the downsizing of classes and teachers
- Some rural areas have been recuperating population since the ‘80s, but this has not always meant an increase of school-age children (lower fertility rates, ageing) which has reduced its potential impact on formal education demand
- Pressures to cut costs and improve efficiency have affected availability of provision and have promoted the involvement of communities and local administrations in maintaining supply, innovative modes of delivery

2d.E&T delivery: quality issues

- Rural areas have diversified their economies and this has implied a larger range and quality of the qualifications demanded
- With decreasing numbers of children this has complicated the delivery in traditional modes: fixed outlet, minimum number of students, regular duration and timing, mostly public, qualifications offered chosen at national or regional level
- This situation has generated an important bottom up experimentation in new forms of delivery: mobile outlets, e-learning, use of ICT technologies, distance learning; multi-level and multi-age classrooms, radio, movies, participation of parents in support and teaching activities, new governance...

2e. Some examples of innovation

In basic education:

- In France (Grenoble), the rural and mountain schools in isolated rural areas work together as a network, with mobile teams of teachers and technical support which have had a positive impact on the performance of students, lower failure rates (EMALA, OER)
- In Germany (Burggen), a Leader group focusing on capacity building for new media know how, in cooperation with Switzerland, created a shared internet platform with school children, using open source software, for 11 municipalities, integrating the learning in school curricula (LAG Auerbergland)
- In Scotland (Western Isles) the local community introduced Gaelic language courses and artistic skills in local schools in order to promote awareness of their cultural heritage and complement existing limited resources (Sleat Primary School)
- In England (West Durham) the Rural Pathfinder initiative a school/nursery transport project provides a Nursery Taxibus to give access to Stanhope Nursery for toddlers and their parents, with a 16 seat vehicle running a scheduled service contract managed by the Durham County Council with the support of local parents (Rural Pathfinders, Defra)

2f. Delivering quality education to rural regions: the way forwards

- A more flexible, contextualized and integrated approach to education and training is of key importance for modern rural areas
- The role of local government in the coordination of delivery and understanding changes in demand is crucial, the state maintains a broad orientation, coordinating, strategic and funding role, in partnership with other institutional levels of governance
- Innovative approaches to delivery should be encouraged and promoted, toolkits, manuals, best practices, transfer of experience and cooperation between administrations
- Pre-school education needs to be expanded using tried innovative approaches (women's centers, cooperation, voluntary work, local community support...) at the same time that extended rural families become nuclear, single...

2f... The way forwards (continued)

- Socio-economic changes call for higher quality standards, diversity of supply, participation, co-financing: these are easier to achieve with specific training than with formal education: complementary role of T needs to be expanded
- Very broadly, two different “typical” rural contexts may be identified in OECD countries:
  - Developing regions with a large presence of subsistence farming, out-migration,remittances, low incomes, starting to diversify, where more emphasis on education and training for farm and off-farm jobs would be required, bridging the gap with urban areas; here education is a function of development in a traditional sense; not true that E&T are bad investments;
  - Developed and restructuring regions, where modernization of farming has already occurred, with incoming population attracted by country lifestyles and the environmental concerns, where E&T should focus more on diversification, context specificity, new technologies applied to work and travel...sustainability, stability

3a. Conclusions

- Mixed funding arrangements and partnerships between public and private stakeholders on one side, and between different levels of government on the other contribute to encourage regional cooperation, competition, narrowing disparities in performance, but also to the contextualization of E&T services, contributing to mutually supportive services (health, social assistance) in sparsely populated areas (the problem of gaps and minimum standards is not universal in advanced countries as seen in state of play)

3b. Conclusions

The role of ICT in rural areas

- Probably overestimated at beginning of 2000 with “knowledge society” (Lisbon agenda), change and solve some of the problems, not all
- How far can ICT deliver distance learning?
- Will it make the usual presumption against rural school closures survive?
- The way towards extended schools and children’s centres, is this the new rural multi-service outlet?

Taken from “The future of services in Rural England - a scenario for 2015, Report to Defra, 2005

4. Ideas to take home

- Distinguish needs of developing and developed rural areas in E&T
- Integrate learning and innovation of ad hoc training to adapt formal education (contextualization, mobile, flexible delivery, ICT, multi-service, new governance)
- Overcoming disparities does not solve the problem of E&T in rural areas: modern services for low density areas is the real problem to solve
- Enlarge curricula to suit occurred or desirable diversification of the local rural economy (brain drain is a false issue)