ENSURING EQUITY OF ACCESS IN EDUCATION

For a more equitable society, all individuals should ideally have access to equivalent learning opportunities, regardless of their socio-economic background, social origin, age or gender. Equity of access, which provides a strong base for developing social cohesion, is a concern which pervades all areas of the OECD's work on education. The main questions addressed are:

- How to ensure equity of access in lifelong learning?
- How to address the needs of disadvantaged children?
- How to mitigate the influence of socio-economic backgrounds?
- Can information and communications technology (ICT) help achieve higher equity of access?

Equity of access in lifelong learning

Lifelong learning covers all purposeful learning activities, from early childhood education and care to adult training, which aim to improve knowledge and competencies for all. For equity purposes, this implies the need to promote access, at all educational levels, from pre-school education to primary, secondary and tertiary education, and finally to adult learning.

Very recently, a new project on equity and education was launched by the OECD Education Committee. It intends to provide analytical work on profiles of inequity, their causes and remedies. Nine countries are participating in in-depth analytical work, four of which will be the subject of a study visit. These visits will produce policy options and recommendations to improve equity. A unique feature of this work is that equity is evaluated in a lifecycle context. Equity of access is also a key theme in the 14-country thematic review of higher education just being launched.

Lifelong learning for all is far from being a reality in every OECD country mainly because of the difficulties in providing sufficient access to pre-school education and to adult learning.

Early childhood education and care

Research on early education shows that children who participate over time in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) are likely to develop higher-order reasoning and problem-solving skills; to be more co-operative and considerate of others; to develop greater self-esteem; and to be better equipped to make effective transitions to compulsory schooling. The effects are generally greater and more long-lasting in children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A recent analysis of the major evaluation studies of centre-based programmes concludes that if certain structural requirements are respected

(*e.g.* sufficient investment, duration and intensity of programming, favourable child-staff ratios…), positive and long-lasting outcomes in both the cognitive and socio-emotional domains are most likely to be delivered by structured programmes with clear developmental and pedagogical aims. For this reason, most OECD countries provide at least two years of public pre-school education for young children before their entry into primary school. In some countries, this service is entirely free; in others, parents will be expected to defray the high costs of early education through a sliding scale of fees.

However, as pointed out in recent OECD work, without a pro-active stance from the government, there is a large risk of a two-tier ECEC system developing, with children from the upper income groups benefiting from high-quality ECEC while children from low-income groups can access only low-quality programmes.

Adult learning

Adult learning also needs to be further developed in OECD countries. Adult education and training participation rates increase with the level of initial education, reinforcing existing inequalities in levels of educational attainment. Age discrimination in various forms is also a feature of many education systems, increasing intergenerational inequity. The policy challenge is therefore to overcome these disparities both through better initial formal education – leading to fewer drop-outs with no commitment to later learning – and through interventions which compensate for the initial problem by encouraging rather sceptical and perhaps unmotivated adults to re-engage with learning. This means paying more attention to access, curriculum and teaching processes. Otherwise, a lot of adult learning is undertaken by those with most education already provided – further increasing inequities in educational outcomes.

An ongoing OECD thematic review showed that increasing the number of courses is not always sufficient. For instance, creating a learning-rich environment at work can be as important to learning as the number of available training courses; and unless the diversity of learning options is increased, tertiary education may serve, primarily, already privileged groups. The OECD is also examining the financial challenges faced by continuing education and how co-financing arrangements could alleviate the problem.

Meeting the needs of disadvantaged children

All students with organic disabilities, learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyscalculia…) or social disadvantages (children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, potentially some migrants and minorities) should benefit from a learning environment equivalent to that of other students.

To address the needs of disadvantaged students, countries can choose between special or regular schools, and so include students in special or in regular classes. While the solutions adopted by countries vary substantially, work done by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) of the OECD Education Directorate shows that in order to equip disadvantaged students, as far as possible, with equivalent learning means, such students, even those with severe disabilities, should be educated in regular, mainstream schools rather than in separate institutions, on condition that the extra resources provided in special schools are maintained elsewhere. There is even evidence that non-disabled students benefit from the extra support provided in regular classes as a result of the inclusion of disabled students.

A continuing challenge is to include and maintain disadvantaged children in school. The Youth Empowerment Partnership Programme (YEPP) developed by the CERI is a core element of the OECD's work in this area, bringing together public, private and independent sectors to develop effective community approaches and improved social cohesion.

Mitigating the effect of socio-economic differences

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that:

- The variation in the reading literacy skills of 15-year-olds can be accounted for by the different results of each school and between schools. Substantial variation among schools suggests differences in equity of learning opportunities. Countries with the highest mean scores in reading are also those with high average performance levels across schools. Conversely, there is a clear tendency for larger disparities among schools to be associated with lower overall performance.
- In many countries, a substantial portion of the variation in performance among schools is associated with differences in students' socio-economic background. This is particularly true when the allocation of students to programmes is linked to their socio-economic background. In almost all countries, there is a clear advantage in attending a school whose students are, on average, from more advantaged family backgrounds.

The overall conclusion is that socio-economic background can explain only part of the disparities in education. The quality of schools and the average level of students are of greater significance. In countries where there is a high degree of differentiation between schools from a socio-economic viewpoint, students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds do worse. In such circumstances, talents remain underutilised and students with disadvantaged home backgrounds may not achieve their full potential, *i.e.* inequality of outcomes can be associated with inequity of opportunity.

The role of ICT

People without access to ICTs or without ICT skills become less and less capable of participating in the knowledge society. To bridge the resulting digital divide, it is necessary to undertake a wide range of policy initiatives. This is particularly urgent as ICTs can help achieve higher equity in access to education.

Many OECD countries have developed programmes for:

- Improving access to ICTs in schools, libraries and learning centres with an emphasis on children and schools in poor neighbourhoods.
- Improving the ICT skills of teachers.
- Providing extra financial help for ICT investment.
- ICT training of low-skilled workers.
- Tax initiatives for encouraging companies to invest in ICT training.

Despite encouraging results, much remains to be done. ICTs can be considered as providing major opportunities to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to broaden learning opportunities, but they can also be considered as presenting major risks: their lack of accessibility to, and use by, both students from low income families and adults with low education can lead to further social disparities.