

## Introduction

**W**hat does it mean for education that our societies are ageing? What does it mean that the Internet is playing an ever larger role in our lives? Does it matter for schools that populations are increasingly overweight?

This book is designed to help thinking about major developments that are affecting the future of education and setting challenges for schools. It does not give conclusive answers: it is not an analytical report nor is it a statistical compendium, and it is certainly not a statement of OECD policy on these different developments. It is instead:

- A stimulus for thinking about trends influencing education – while the trends are robust, the questions raised for education are illustrative and suggestive.
- An invitation for users to look further and to add to this basic coverage examples of trends from their own countries or regions.

Using trends is not straightforward. Opinions differ on historical developments and which ones are most important. Even when there is agreement on the past, the future will often not turn out to be a smooth continuation of past patterns. Moreover, emerging trends barely visible or noticed at the present time may become critically important in the future. To help the reader use this resource, this first section discusses how trends may be addressed and interpreted.

### FOR WHOM IS THIS TOOL RELEVANT?

We think that this tool will be relevant for everyone active in the field of education. We have tried to avoid jargon and technical terminology and the format has been chosen to make complex data accessible.

- *Policy makers, officials, advisors and policy analysts* may use it as a source of robust trends to build on in thinking through the long-term possibilities for education and what the trends might mean for school policies.
- *School and local leaders and other stakeholders* who increasingly need to make long-term, strategic plans or are being consulted on such decisions may use the tool to inform the choices they face.
- *Teacher educators* may use it as material for programmes aimed at student and practising teachers and at school leaders to help them consider their futures and professional practice.
- *Teachers* can use it as an aid for professional development and as a starting point for reflection on practice and curriculum issues.

There are others who may find this selection of trends equally stimulating. The choice of trends and the treatment given to them in the text, however, are designed especially for those working in the educational field and specifically those with a particular interest in school-age learning.

## WHY THESE TRENDS?

This resource contains 26 major topics each illustrated by 2 figures. While all the trends included are relevant to education, not all relevant trends are in this resource – it is necessarily highly selective. As well as relevance for education, the criterion for selection has been the presence of international through-time evidence. This inevitably biases its coverage towards the economic, social, environmental, demographic and educational fields where measurements have been in place long enough to give a picture of developments over time. Some of the factors importantly shaping education are highly subjective and cultural in content, making them difficult to pin down at any one time, let alone over time, and these are not covered.

The focus is primarily on OECD countries, though where they are available, broader global data are used. The different sources mean that there are no single time frames: in some cases the trends are charted over a short decade or so; in some others, very long-term trends are available.

We therefore stress that this resource is a stimulus to further thinking, not a compendium of all the major trends relevant to the future of schooling.

## WHY THIS FORMAT AND STRUCTURE?

The trends have been grouped into nine broad themes, each with a short introduction as well as a list of publications for further reference. Each theme consists of two, three or four topics or sets of trends, each topic presented in two-page format. Each of these starts with a short introduction, followed by two figures and accompanying text. We conclude each topic with illustrative questions about education that the trends give rise to in order to stimulate reflection and further questions. There is no one best way to order these broad themes, but we think that the structure chosen provides a helpful introduction:

- First, there are major demographic trends. These concern the OECD countries and lead on to global developments not just of population levels and movements but living conditions and the environment.
- Second, there are economic trends relating both to the nature of economies and to the kinds of work and jobs people do.
- Third, we present themes related to the digital (and learning) society in which we live, in which education makes its own important contribution.
- Fourth, there are the political and social factors to do with the role of the state, the social environment and families, and trends concerning sustainability.

## HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

The future is inherently unpredictable. Yet, everyone – including policy makers and managers in education – needs to make plans and take the future into account. Looking at trends informs our ideas about what might happen through better understanding of what is changing in education's environment.

When studying trends we are studying the past and there are no guarantees that the future will see past developments continue, let alone continue smoothly. We can sometimes be just plain wrong:

“Stocks have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau.” (Irving Fisher, Professor of Economics, Yale University, just before the 1929 Wall St. Crash)

Nor is it guaranteed that the trends that were important in the past or seem so now will remain influential in the future; emerging trends barely visible at the moment may become of central importance in the future. When aircraft were just beginning to become operational, the military leader who was to become Commander-in-Chief during WWI declared:

“Airplanes are interesting toys but of no military value.” (Maréchal Ferdinand Foch, École Supérieure de Guerre)

This book is thus a starting point and not conclusive about what is setting directions for the future. The following questions are useful when thinking about trends.

## WHICH TRENDS ARE RELEVANT?

### **Is this trend relevant in this specific context?**

Trends may differ both in size and direction in different countries, regions, districts or even schools. Ageing populations, for example, may be a bigger problem in rural than in urban areas or concentrated in certain parts of the country or districts in a city. International trends may have different impacts in different places: rising sea levels are potentially disastrous for Bangladesh but not for Nepal.

### **Are there other trends to take into account?**

The trends in this resource are certainly not the only relevant ones and not all of them apply equally in each location or context. There may be other, perhaps local, trends that will be just as important to consider. Different places face different challenges: some, for instance, are declining and de-populating while other areas even in the same country are booming and attracting new people. Users will need to think of what are the important trends for their purpose.

## HOW IMPORTANT ARE THESE TRENDS?

### **How predictable is this trend?**

Trends differ as to how far their continuation is predictable. Some trends – for instance, to do with population growth or environment – lend themselves more easily to long-term planning. Others are less predictable, such as those to do with youth culture or international conflict. For these, making scenarios of what would happen if a particular trend would develop in a certain way may well be more appropriate than extrapolation.

### **What is the pace of this trend?**

Some trends develop slowly (global temperatures went up around 0.74 °C in the last 100 years) while other trends are more dynamic (international trade in services quadrupled in less than twenty years). Trends with a slow pace are easier to deal with in the sense that they allow for more time to think about what they mean and how to respond.

### **What is the impact of the trend?**

Climate change may be slow but its potential impact is enormous, possibly threatening life on our planet. Other trends like changing fashion may be more rapid, but have less impact on education. Generally, the more impact the trend has, the more important it is to anticipate it.

## **HOW CAN WE DEAL WITH THESE TRENDS?**

### **Can we predict?**

When trends are predictable, long-term planning is greatly facilitated. With demographic change fairly predictable and all children going into primary education, the capacity needed in primary education in, say, 10 years time is open to calculation.

### **Can we influence?**

If trends are not predictable it may still be possible to influence them. Universities have great difficulty in predicting the number of students who will choose a certain study programme. However, they can attempt to influence the numbers of students applying through advertising campaigns.

### **Can we react?**

If both predicting and influencing are impossible, creating the flexibility to be able to react after events occur may be the best option. For example, someone starting a business who does not know how it will take off is better advised to lease offices than buy them.