Summary Report of the Finnish National Seminar
13 September 2011, Helsinki, Finland

INNOVATION STRATEGY FOR EDUCATION – DO WE HAVE ONE, DO WE NEED ONE?

In relation to the OECD/CERI Innovation Strategy for Education and Training, a Finnish national seminar was held on 13 September 2011 in Helsinki, Finland. The event was co-organized by the Finnish Ministry for Education and Culture and the Finnish National Board of Education. The participants were mainly Finnish education professionals representing different sectors of education. The OECD/CERI Innovation Strategy for Education and Training project leader took part in the event.

The seminar focused on exploring the role of skills and education in fostering innovation in Finland. The event challenged the participants to reflect whether in Finland there is a national strategy to support innovation in education and if it is necessary to have such a strategy.

Setting the scene

In her opening remarks, Ms. Anita Lehikoinen (Finnish Ministry for Education and Culture) highlighted some challenges for education and innovation in Finland. The objective of the government is to make Finland the most competent nation in the world by 2020. In this regard, despite the good overall situation, improvement is still needed in several domains. The rise in the average level of education has not quite kept up with the objectives set. More attention needs to be paid to preventing marginalization. Also the need to lengthen careers and update knowledge and skills in the course of life provides room for innovation. While the autonomy of higher education institutions in Finland has been increased, the next step is to explore means to increase the autonomy for individuals.

In his keynote speech, Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin (OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation) focused on the importance of skills and education for innovation. Innovation builds on diverse skills. The challenge for education is to promote simultaneously skills such as critical thinking, imagination and collaboration, in addition to subject-based know-how. For example, while being among the top countries regarding PISA science achievement, students’ interest in science in Finland is among the lowest in OECD countries. Although Finnish higher education graduates are generally satisfied with their education, especially critical thinking, developing one’s own ideas and entrepreneurship appear to require more encouragement. Promoting innovation calls for access to and re-thinking of education, together with widening participation in innovation.

In the subsequent commentaries, the ideas emerging from the OECD/CERI work were somewhat mirrored to the Finnish context:

- Mr. Jukka Kola (University of Helsinki) underlined the need to transfer the Finnish PISA success to higher education and eventually to innovations. Emphasis on multidisciplinarity, internationalisation, entrepreneurship and lifelong learning in teaching could open avenues towards this direction. Teaching based on top research should promote skills for innovation. Interdisciplinarity, already present in research, should be transferred also to teaching.
- Mr. Mika Maliranta (Research Institute of Finnish Economy) focused his intervention on vocational education and training. Vocational education and training providers need better results-based incentives. Employment situation of graduates should provide a good basis for performance evaluation.

- Mr. Jorma Kauppinen (Finnish National Board of Education) highlighted some of the ongoing developments in the Finnish education policy. The aim for the ongoing curriculum renewal is to take thinking and creativity skills as well as social and behavioural skills better into account. However, reliable assessment of these kinds of “general citizenship” skills remains a challenge.

**Intense discussions**

The need for a national innovation strategy for education, coupled with considerations on developing innovativeness, was further explored in three parallel workshops and the subsequent final discussion.

**Education and individual skills for innovation**

- Student interest and curiosity – or the lack of them – were a point of attention: why does student interest seem to diminish during basic education? Perhaps students do not have enough opportunities to adequately demonstrate their true ability? The difference between adult education and higher education regarding student interest was highlighted. University pedagogy may need to look for new approaches in order to maintain student motivation better.

- There was a call for more hands-on and active teaching, together with the need to emphasise things that are important for students. More attention needs to be paid on how to create more cooperation between schools and society. The traditional idea of teachers simply transmitting their knowledge to students was criticised, but it was also recognised that rewarding innovativeness when assessing students tends to be difficult.

- The discussions on vocational education and training in particular highlighted the need to improve connections – and break the barriers – between education and work life. School and workplace could merge their activities more than before or even take each other’s roles.

**Ways to promote education conducive to innovation**

- The idea of the national innovation strategy for education was cautiously supported, although many thought it could also form a part of another education strategy. The eventual strategy would itself need to be innovative and flexible in order to truly advance innovations. At the same time, the very idea of a “strategy” was questioned – completely new kind of thinking and perspective may be needed, as opposed to the common way of defining ends and means. It was pointed out that maybe the first thing to consider is how not to “kill” innovation.

- The discussions highlighted the need for interaction and multi-disciplinarity in developing new ways of doing things in education. This translates to bringing together people from different fields and levels of education. Many emphasised also the need to take student perspective better into account in educational development work.

**Education and innovation in a wider context**

- The discussions touched also upon the impact of culture on innovation. It was suspected that especially the Finnish conformist and consensus seeking culture may be a barrier to innovation.
The situation could perhaps improve, if people would feel that they are allowed to break common patterns.

- The labour market may also need its own strategy for innovation – developing education is not enough, if innovation is eventually hindered in the workplaces. The role of leadership was generally seen as a key in supporting or, alternatively, hampering innovativeness in workplaces.