

CERI Conference: Opening Remarks

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the OECD. I am delighted to be opening this conference which seeks to address three key preoccupations of the OECD: 'Innovation, Governance and Education Reform' in a holistic way. The interconnections between all three policy areas are immense and getting them right essential for the future health of our global economy.

Unfortunately, the global economy is not in great health. Six years into the crisis, many economies are still struggling to find a path to a confident recovery and stronger growth. In particular, the weak and uneven global recovery has diminished our capacity to address the jobs crisis. Globally, an estimated 202 million people remain unemployed, with many more in low-paid and precarious jobs. More worryingly, youth unemployment rates have reached alarming levels: the OECD rate currently stands at 14.7%, but it is still over 50% in countries like Greece and Spain. This is a social tragedy!

Boosting the competitiveness of countries and increasing job opportunities is a key priority. But it very much depends on what people can do with what they know. For individuals, improved skill levels bring better employment opportunities, wider social networks and increased capacity to assess and manage risks. For communities, enhanced skills can provide greater flexibility and responsiveness to rapid social and economic change. In short, skills are the engine of empowerment!

In 2012, we launched our Skills Strategy to help countries build better skills policies and turn them into jobs, growth, and better lives. Since then we have been working with individual countries on national skills strategies to ensure a tailor-made approach to skills development. A fundamental basis for this work is the robust comparative measurement provided by the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (otherwise known as PIAAC) and the PISA programme.

The Survey of Adult Skills has opened a new gold-mine of knowledge. We have found that proficiency in basic skills affects more than earnings and employment. In all countries, adults with lower literacy proficiency are far more likely than those with better literacy skills to report poor health, to perceive themselves as objects rather than actors in political processes, and to have less trust in others.

We have also found that actual skill levels often differ markedly from what formal education qualifications suggest. In fact, in most countries at least a quarter of university graduates do not score higher than Level 2 on our literacy test, and are thus insufficiently equipped for what their jobs demand of them. PISA has also shown us that too many younger people in formal education are still not reaching basic minimum levels and in the average OECD

country, more than one in five students can be counted as a low achiever in not reaching achievements at least at PISA Level 2.

If the old models are not delivering high quality and equitable results, we need to be ready to innovate. This becomes even truer as our collective demands for what education should attain become increasingly ambitious. The social and economic transformations in the past decades have fundamentally changed the demand for skills, making non-routine and analytical skills more demanded than ever before. In order to develop these skills, learning must be increasingly grounded in:

- Specific ways of thinking that include creativity, critical thinking, problem solving and decision making.
- Specific ways of working collaboration and teamwork that allow for jointly developing and sharing knowledge; and
- Specific tools for working such as new technologies and information literacy in order to deal with the information flows and for constructing one's own knowledge.

The OECD has learned that 21st century learning environments should above all aim to make learning central and encourage engagement among students. Further, they should foster lifelong learning skills rather than exclusively qualifications-focused education, be acutely sensitive to individual differences and provide continual assessment with formative feedback. Learning environments also need to be demand-sensitive, and actively involve employers rather than being based on purely government designed curricula taught in exclusively school-based systems. Lastly, it should be ensured that learning is a social and collaborative activity and that it promotes connections across subjects and activities reaching far beyond school.

Despite the benefits of innovation, it is not always encouraged in education. There is the inherent conservatism found within organisations and in the wider community and many are fearful of change. Even so, our own recently-published report *“Measuring Innovation in Education: A New Perspective”* shows that measured levels of innovation in education are as high as in many other public policy sectors but that often this is happening at the frontline in schools and classrooms, with pioneering teachers, inventive school leaders and other partners from outside education together creating innovative learning environments. The challenge that you are tackling here today is how these exceptional scattered practices can be made more widespread and systemic.

Governance is key to making this happen. The OECD through its Innovation Strategy urges countries to develop a “whole-of-government” approach, aligning Ministries, policies and reforms into an effective, efficient and coherent nation-wide effort to strengthen innovation. The OECD also urges a more experimental approach to innovation policy,

fostering a culture of probing and experimenting, and learning from failures as well as successes.

But all this depends on good governance and trust between stakeholders. The path toward transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability is not an easy one, as it entails a paradigm shift that puts citizens at the heart not only of public policies but also of the very functioning of public administrations. This applies to education as to all other sectors of public policy.

In particular, innovative many system-level education reforms do not penetrate deeply into organisational cultures within education and the basic practices of teaching and learning. Like turning a tanker, it is particularly difficult to ensure that such large systems can respond and engender 21st century professional practices on a much wider scale.

Many of the traditional reform instruments have limited impact because they do not lead to culture change. The solution is to develop drivers that work directly on changing the culture of teaching and learning. Instead of direct regulation and the old methods of control and compliance, this means focusing on pedagogy, on ensuring that assessments are used to improve learning, on getting teachers to work collaboratively, and making knowledge the medium of change made available through different platforms such as the “Respire” innovation platform in France or the “Mother Tongue Theme Site” in Sweden.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Fostering 21st century skills, creativity, understanding, and lifelong learning are critical to the future of our global economy. However, we cannot rely on traditional instruments of reform. We need to innovate. And we need better governance to ensure that change does happen. All of you here today have a role to play. I wish you all the best in your discussions and assure you that the OECD is here to help you develop “better policies for better lives”.