DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, LABOUR AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
EDUCATION COMMITTEE
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Indicators of Education Systems

CROSS-CUTTING POLICY ISSUES SESSION 6 OF THE 4th INES
GENERAL ASSEMBLY ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

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CROSS-CUTTING POLICY ISSUES  
SESSION 6 OF THE 4TH INES GENERAL ASSEMBLY  

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION  

Introduction  

1. The performance of education and training systems is a continuing concern for the public as well as policy-makers. Some of the policy concerns are pervasive in nature that cut across sectors and types of provision, while others are more sector or content specific. Policy-makers need data and indicators for assessing progress and improving performance in both these dimensions. The INES work programme has responded to both cross-cutting and sector specific concerns. In the latest edition of *Education at a Glance*, for example, Chapters B and C treat primarily cross-cutting themes, sections D and F are primarily sector oriented, and Sections A and E cover both perspectives.

2. This division is also reflected in the programme of the 4th General Assembly where Sessions 2-4, for example, focus on specific content areas or sectors. The purpose of this session is to focus on the cross-cutting themes as such, to assess how effectively the INES work programme has responded to them and what the priorities for future developmental work should be.

3. Several cross-cutting themes can be identified from the discussions of education policy. Lifelong learning, equity, resources, quality, governance, roles and responsibilities of different partners, are some examples of the policy concerns, noted in the country comments, that cut across individual components of the system. As not all of these themes can be examined in one session, two (lifelong learning and equity in education) have been chosen to illustrate the general approach that might be adopted in assessing the analytical implications of transversal perspectives. The General Assembly will also need to address how the discussion might be brought together to give practical guidance for INES work in the future.

The lifelong learning perspective  

4. The concept of lifelong learning has been discussed since the early 1970s, when it referred to “second chance” or “recurrent education” for adults. In the 1990s the concept was redefined to a truly “cradle to grave” view. The distinguishing features of the new concept include:

- A recognition that learning occurs during the whole course of a person’s life;

- A recognition of the importance of diverse forms and settings of learning experiences, including formal, non-formal and informal learning, which are sometimes referred to as the “life-wide” dimension of learning. (Non-formal learning comprises any sustained and organised activities that do not correspond exactly to the definition of formal education. It can take place outside educational institutions, and cater to persons of all ages. Informal learning consists of all intended learning activities that cannot be classified as formal or non-formal education.);
The centrality of learner and learner needs, which signals a shift from the supply of learning provision to the demand side; and

An emphasis on self-paced and self-directed learning and the associated emphasis on motivation to learn and “learning to learn”.

**Data needs for lifelong learning**

5. Lifelong learning is an all-embracing concept and data needs for analysis are wide-ranging and complex. For a discussion of data needs, the following dimensions need to be considered:

- **Coverage of learning activities**: Indicators need to cover all purposeful learning, formal, non-formal and informal, and in all phases of life, from early childhood to old age. Data on the incidence, intensity and quality of learning are needed for all age ranges and for all forms of learning.

- **Structure of provision and related processes**: The recognition that learning takes place in diverse settings suggests a systemic view of the structure of learning opportunities, one which treats different forms of learning as part of a linked system. Information is needed on pathways between different forms and settings of learning, and how the structure of provision matches the structure of needs. Information is needed on what learning is identified, certified and recognised.

- **Inputs and resources to learning**: These include human, financial and technological resources, including methods of teaching and learning. Information is required on the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching and learning in diverse settings. Lifelong learning for all requires information on investment in all types of learning, whether by governments, private entities or the individuals themselves. These are needed to answer the question whether learning resources are distributed adequately over the lifecycle of the individual and who pays and benefits from them.

- **Outcomes**: Lifelong learning broadens the concept of outcomes to include attitudinal and motivational behaviour. How the content of programmes, institutional arrangements and teaching and learning methods affect the motivation to learn and the ability to learn is central to lifelong learning strategies. In addition to the well-established data on educational attainment, direct measures of the knowledge and skills acquired as an outcome of the learning process are needed, including informal learning.

- **A range of perspectives**: Lifelong learning involves a wide range of stakeholders, each with different types of information needs for decision-making. Individual learning outcomes remain at the centre but the whole structure of provision needs to be taken into account from the perspectives of individuals, providers, governments (at different levels), employers, families and society at large. The information needs of different stakeholders differ from each other. Governments require, for example, information on behaviour patterns of other stakeholders – not least the learners – who provide input to and impinge on the outcomes of learning activity, in order to consider the full consequences of policy decisions. They also need different types of information for making various decisions with different time horizons: some policies and programmes can be applied in the short and medium-term but often results can only be evaluated over the long-term. Other stakeholders like employers and providers have different information needs. Information for individual learners on the array of learning
opportunities, their forms, costs and intended or likely outcomes, is uneven and not easily accessed; this is seen as a crucial element in a lifelong learning approach which relies on informed choices of learners and their families and envisages the match between backgrounds and interests and the types and forms of learning options as a key to successful learning.

Questions for discussion: The lifelong learning perspective suggests that new data are needed in a number of areas. Taking into account the potential of data development at the international level, which category of data needs are more pressing than others and what priority ordering should they be assigned. For example, should resourcing of lifelong learning be given a higher priority than the data needs of individual learners?

Gaps in data and indicators

6. Most if not all of the INES indicators are relevant and useful for examining some aspects of lifelong learning. However, there are many gaps in the knowledge base for developing strategies for lifelong learning.

- **Coverage and participation:** The new emphasis on informal learning highlights the need for data on experiences outside educational institutions, which are particularly lacking. By their nature, these experiences are harder to record and quantify, but there is nevertheless scope to develop improved assessments of such activity. Information on informal learning represents a glaring gap. Participation data are specially lacking for the early childhood years and for participation in non-formal and informal learning.

- **Structure of provision and processes:** So far, INES has largely focused on the educational programme as the unit of analysis. Very limited information is therefore available on pathways and the complementarity and articulation between programmes. Key gaps exist on transition processes and pathways between initial learning, work and further learning. Information is also needed on how different types of provision are linked together and cater to the needs of people in their different life phases. Information is needed on the attributes of a “culture” of learning, attitudinal changes that contribute to such a culture, and how they can be given institutional expression.

- **Inputs and resource:** Available information on human, financial and technological inputs are well established, but new information is needed on informal learning as this area increases in importance. More information is required on the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching and learning. The rapidly changing technology of learning may alter the cost, availability, and effectiveness of different modes of teaching and learning. The role of teachers, and of the learning environment, may also be significantly changed.

- **Outcome:** Information gaps are arguably most pressing on the outcomes of learning. Some outcome measures such as formal educational attainment, are well known and widely available, but there is a great dearth of information on the knowledge and skills acquired as an outcome of the learning process. This is especially the case with informal learning. Information on processes and measures to identify, certify and recognise such learning are needed. Information is sorely lacking on the broader definition of outcomes that includes attitudinal and motivational behaviour.
7. In January 1996, OECD Education Ministers called for “lifelong learning for all” as a strategy to guide their education and training policy. They invited the OECD to “monitor progress” towards the realisation of this goal. In addition to data needs just described, the development and monitoring of strategies of lifelong learning requires new analyses. Most available analyses of lifelong learning are concerned with individual sectors. There is a glaring gap of analysis of the system of lifelong learning as a whole, how such a system might be analysed, developed and implemented, although the ongoing OECD country review of Norway’s system of lifelong learning will be some help. A key aspect of lifelong learning strategies is the co-ordination of policies across different jurisdictions, which have partial responsibilities for various aspects of lifelong learning. There is little analysis of what co-ordination of policies is effective and what institutional arrangements are needed to improve effectiveness. Since lifelong learning involves a range of stakeholders in addition to government, the implementation of lifelong learning strategies requires a rethinking of the roles and responsibilities of different actors. There is limited analysis of the appropriate division of the roles and responsibilities and particularly their impact on the sharing of costs and benefits. The available analysis of the role markets can play in relation to the government is generally by sector and fragmentary.

8. Available analyses are particularly deficient in tracing how individuals learn over phases of the lifecycle, what pathways are available to them, and how learning resources are spread over the lifecycle. Cohort and longitudinal analyses are needed to fill this gap. The incentives and barriers to learning faced by adults, in particular, need to be intensively examined. The analysis of qualification structures, the role they play in promoting learning, the recognition and certification of skills and competence is underdeveloped.

Questions for discussion: Monitoring progress on lifelong learning strategies is expected to be a key theme for the forthcoming meeting of OECD Education Ministers in April 2001. What areas of analysis should be given a high priority. In which area is the international comparative analysis most useful and what questions are best handled nationally?
The equity in education perspective

Importance for the political agenda:

9. Equity issues, in their diverse manifestations, are high on the policy agenda of OECD countries. The uneven distribution of learning opportunities and outcomes among the OECD population is a major policy concern because it is intimately connected with social and economic inequalities. Investment in education has an impact on the economic success of the individual, the enterprise and the economy. On the social plane, inequities in investment in learning can be a major factor in social marginalisation and exclusion. The concern with educational inequalities is of a long-standing nature but recent developments have only served to ensure its prominent place on the policy agenda.

− First, there is evidence that some forms of social and economic inequalities have worsened in some countries since the 1980s, even though their nature, permanence or severity is not well established.

− Second, inequalities in the distribution of learning opportunities are viewed as important barriers to transition to knowledge societies. As learning becomes a more critical element of the knowledge economy, the disadvantages associated with those left behind becomes more costly to the economy and society.

− Third, there is a concern that inequities in the access and use of information and communication technologies may be generating a “digital divide”, opening up a gap between “knowledge haves” and “have-nots”.

− Finally, there is a greater awareness that issues of inequality are multidimensional in nature, they cut across sectors of provision, and addressing them requires action in a number of policy areas. As is documented below, however, the statistical and analytical knowledge base for informing policy decisions in this area is rather limited, despite the policy importance of the issues.

A complex concept

10. Given the importance of these issues, there is a need for a sound knowledge base - indicators and analyses - to help develop policies for dealing with educational inequalities. This knowledge base must be based on an unambiguous understanding of equity concepts that are relevant for policy purposes and cross-nationally and cross-culturally valid. Achieving this, however, is complicated by several factors. Discussions of educational equality employ several concepts - equity, equality, dispersion, differences etc. - that are often defined imprecisely or simply in different ways across contexts and countries. Some are value-laden terms whose interpretation depends on the norms of fairness and social justice. These norms differ among and within countries and communities and it is no surprise that there are marked differences in how equality is understood and interpreted among and within Member countries. While each term may be appropriate in its context, its context and policy relevance may be quite different. This makes internationally comparative analysis very difficult.

11. Aside from these definitional issues, equality of opportunities can be assessed at various levels: at the level of the individual or certain economic, social or otherwise defined groups, in terms of the characteristics of geographic entities in which individuals live, or in terms of systemic characteristics of
countries as a whole. The fact that educational opportunities, processes and outcomes are both the causes and consequences of other types of inequalities adds to the level of complexity.

12. In light of these complexities, it has been argued that a co-ordinated international strategy for the systematic development of educational equity indicators should proceed from an agreed framework that can help identify important policy questions and types of data and analyses that can help answer them.

Questions for discussion: For which equity related policy issues is an internationally comparative perspective particularly important and, conversely, which issues are best addressed through national analysis?

Equity indicators in the INES work

13. The concern with equity has been an important feature of INES since the very inception. First of all, INES has produced various indicators on disparities in educational outcomes. The focus of these indicators was typically on the distribution of outcomes in countries, with emphasis given to relative dispersions of achievement scores or, alternatively, the proportion of students reaching certain performance levels.

14. INES has also started to examine basic demographic, social and geographic factors that relate to disparities in educational outcomes and that could point to the consequences of disparities. These indicators have sought to address questions such as: What are the social and economic background characteristics of students at risk and how do these characteristics vary across countries? Can we identify systemic factors that impact on disparities in educational outcomes? What are the relative (partial) effects of selected baskets of policy-malleable factors? Do social and economic factors influence patterns of disadvantages differently for different groups of students or adults?

15. Through PISA, INES is now beginning to also look at the dynamics of disparities in educational outcomes, addressing questions such as: How do disparities in outcomes evolve as students move through education systems? How do countries differ with respect to the extent to which schools moderate or reinforce disparities in outcomes? To what extent do disparities in outcomes between students with different backgrounds change over time? To what extent, independently of material circumstances, is the propensity to low educational outcomes repeated from one generation to the next? In addition, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) has provided a rich source of information that has allowed to relate educational disparities to broader social and economic outcomes.

16. Finally, INES has produced various measures of inter-group dispersion, such as educational attainment data on gender and age and other characteristics including inter-generational information. Occasional inter-group measures of dispersion, available less frequently than the previous category, has been provided by region, socio-economic and ethnic characteristics, and special learning needs.

Gaps in data and analyses

17. Despite these efforts, there is a glaring dearth of internationally comparative data on many important aspects of equity.

18. While the above mentioned indicator-types aim to provide a broad picture of disparities in the results of education, the information base on policies that impact on educational disparities is insufficiently developed. The question “who pays”, “how much” and “for whom” is central to the concepts of equity and relates to the fairness of the overall public education allocation system. Indicators are missing that describe
where expenditure differences occur and to what degree and that could address questions such as: How do education resource measures, such as total expenditures per student, vary in different types of regional or local entities within a country? How do these entities serve different types of students and how do communities allocate resources across the categories of instruction, administration, and capital outlay? The problem is that such indicators require disaggregated data on school finance which only can only be partially proxied by other resource variables such as student-staff ratios, class sizes, hours of instruction etc. which currently do not exist.

19. Also information on policies that impact on educational disparities is not yet available that could capture school processes that impact on equity, such as differentiation policies and practices; instructional policies and practices designed to meet the needs of disadvantaged children and policies for the differential allocation of financial and human resources to enhance the equality of opportunities.

20. Finally, a great deal of data and analysis focus on young people and learning opportunities in the formal system. It is important to examine equity issues in the context of lifelong learning, discussed above. Information on the life-cycle progress of cohorts and longitudinal information is a particularly significant gap. In each of these areas, most information is available at a point in time or for some years. These data are, in general, not available. Studies have shown that the socio-economic background of learners is a key determinant of educational resources, processes and outcomes, but the data in this area are very limited, though the new PISA instrument will help to provide information for 15 year-olds.

21. Such information will be needed for evaluating the impact of policies in support of devolution, for identifying factors inherent in education systems that impact on the equity of educational opportunities as well as on differences in educational outcomes and for revealing why some groups tend towards social disadvantage more than others. Such information can also give support policy incentives designed to foster equity by giving clues on how these processes are reversed for many individuals in these groups - i.e. for whom predicted failure becomes success and potential exclusion transforms into inclusion.

22. In regard to analyses, equity has figured conspicuously in a range of activities in the programmes of work of the Education Committee and the CERI Governing Board. A volume was issued on Education and Equity in 1997 and Overcoming School Failure was published in 1998. The topic of exclusion appears as an activity area in the CERI programme while equity is a common and cross-cutting theme in each of the four thematic reviews (tertiary education, transition from schooling to work, early childhood education and care, and adult learning) conducted by the Committee. Reflecting its political significance the equity theme has been identified as one of the three main topics for discussion for the forthcoming meeting of OECD Education Ministers. The analytical work on equity is however hampered by the lack of data noted above. Analyses are particularly deficient in assessing and identifying the relative weights of various factors that contribute to outcomes at different levels of learning experience and in the labour market. Another key area where analyses is sorely lacking is in the assessment and evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of different policy interventions in improving the position of different target groups. While many of the best practices are assessed in a qualitative way in various activities of the Education Committee and the CERI Governing Board, robust quantitative analysis is lacking on account of data deficiencies.

Questions for discussion: There is a glaring information gap for examining equity issues. Are the gaps identified in the background documentation the key ones for international comparisons or are there others that need to be filled on a priority basis? Should the international effort be directed to developing information at the national level while leaving the sub-national information largely for countries to develop according to their priorities?
The need for an agreed framework

23. As noted above, given the complex nature of the equity issues it is important to proceed from an agreed framework for identifying priority data and analytical needs. Since a large number of stakeholders are involved in investment decisions regarding the acquisition and provision of learning, the need for data development and analytical work is to be viewed from a range of perspectives that include individuals, organisations, institutions and governments. Taking this into account, the INES Steering Group had established an *ad hoc* group to examine the conceptual underpinnings for equity indicators. The INES *ad hoc* group on equity proposes a framework for this. One of its main features is to distinguish between “equality” - which it argues can be measured in an objective and descriptive manner - from “equity” which it defines as depending on cultural aspects and refers to norms of fairness and justice. Based on this framework, the *ad hoc* group has produced a set of nine main principles for guiding the work on equity indicators. Table 2 of the Compendium paper on equity describes a system of indicators on equity in education. It suggests that in addition to the descriptive statistics, indicators should be developed to survey “the state and change, on the part of citizens, parents, students, teachers and other stakeholders, of the representations, attitudes, opinions and feelings on fairness related to education, about the prevailing criteria of justice and about the equity of the education system”. Greater detail on individual data categories and specific indicators are noted in the Compendium paper.

24. A different and more modest approach would be to concentrate the international effort on developing descriptive statistics of actual patterns and distribution learning opportunities. The rationale for this approach is that even some of the most basic data are missing and needed urgently. The international effort could focus on those statistics that are objective in nature, and easier to measure. A consensus on comparable measures is more likely to be achieved in this situation and the international value-added is best achieved where comparability is more likely to be assured. This approach would leave the thorny issues of assessing norms of social justice for country level work. The rationale is that achieving international consensus on such measures is likely to be difficult. This approach recognises the importance of views and opinions regarding norms of fairness and justice that are essential for assessing equity policies and their outcomes. However, this work is best carried out within the national context and it would be needed and used by countries to interpret the basic facts gathered through the international effort.

Questions for discussion: It is important to develop international work on equity indicators within an internationally agreed framework. How inclusive should this framework be: Should it focus on basic internationally comparable patterns of distribution or should it give equal importance to measuring norms of social justice and fairness?