



PRESS BULLETIN

International Conference on the New Millennium Learners

Brussels 21/22/23 September

Venue: Flemish Ministry of Education & Training

This International Conference jointly organised by the OECD and the Flemish Ministry of Education will take place in Brussels and has attracted the interest of 250 delegates of more than 30 countries.

It addresses two main issues:

- the recognition of the impact that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are having on our economies and societies, which are increasingly demanding new skills and competencies intended to make students competitive workers and responsible citizens in a knowledge-based model of social and economic development.
- the growing awareness that the younger generations of learners are so adept to ICT and digital media that their learning expectations and educational performance become influenced, and this is why the OECD often refers to this as the emergence of the New Millennium Learners and has launched a project under this theme.

These two issues, the policy concern about how effectively ICT are used in schools and the need to know more about the technology-induced changes experienced by students, set the context for this Conference.

Two main messages emerge from the Conference:

1. Countries have to cooperate to identify and foster the development of 21st Century skills and competencies.

Developments in society and economy require education to equip young people with new skills and competencies, which allow them to benefit from the emerging new forms of socialisation and to contribute actively to economic development under a system where the main asset is knowledge. These skills and competencies are often referred to as the 21st Century skills and competencies, as to indicate that they are more related to the needs of the emerging models of economic and social development than with those of the past Century, far more suited to an industrial mode of production.

Young people are already experiencing the new forms of socialisation and social capital acquisition that ICT developments are contributing to create. Their education, both at school and at home, needs to provide them with the social values and attitudes as well as with the constructive

experiences that will allow them to benefit responsibly from these opportunities and contribute actively to these new spaces of social life.

On the other hand, today's labour force has to be equipped with the set of skills and competencies which are suited to the knowledge economies. Most of them are related to knowledge management, which includes processes related to information selection, acquisition, integration, analysis and sharing in socially networked environments. Not surprisingly, most of these competencies, if not all, are either supported or enhanced by ICT. For young people, schools are the only place where such competencies and skills can be educated.

Accordingly, governments should make an effort to properly identify and conceptualise the set of skills and competencies required as to incorporate them into the educational standards that every student should be able reach by the end of compulsory schooling. Governments should realise that to be successful in this process there are two requirements to be met. On the one hand, participation of both economic and social institutions, ranging from companies to higher education institutions, is critical. On the other hand, all this process risks of being irrelevant for schools unless this set of skills and competencies becomes the very core of what teachers and schools should care about, and this can only be done by incorporating them into the national education standards that are enforced and assessed by governments.

2. Education has to address the emerging second digital divide.

In OECD countries the first digital divide among young people seems to be fading: access to ICT is not anymore a problem. However, a second and more subtle digital divide is emerging amongst them. This one is related to the educational benefits that young people can obtain from computer use according to their economic, cultural and social capital. PISA studies show that computer use can make a difference in educational performance if the student is duly equipped with the right set of competencies, skills and attitudes. In their absence, no matter how intense the computer use is the expected benefits are going to be lost. Therefore, computer use, and it may well be hypothesised that digital media use at large as well, tend to multiply the positive influence of a student's background capital as to add significant gains in terms of educational performance.

This is yet another powerful reason for governments to engage in the identification of the 21st Century skills and competencies, and for teachers and schools to consider the importance of their development in the light of the evidence of this second digital divide.

Teachers and schools in particular can make a difference for those pupils who lack the appropriate social and cultural capital to benefit from digital media use in a way that becomes significant for their educational performance. If teachers and schools failed to acknowledge this second digital divide, and act accordingly, they would be in fact reinforcing its emergence.

In this discussion it is important to realise that the fact that they appear to be technology savvy does not imply at all that they have also developed the right set of skills and competencies that would make of them responsible, critical and creative users of technology. The fact that educators, parents and particularly teachers, are less technology savvy than young people should not be anymore an excuse for giving up the educational responsibility on the development of the 21st Century skills and competencies.

More information: www.NML-conference.be and www.oecd.org/edu/nml

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