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## **INTRODUCTION:** Building stronger policy connections

There is widespread recognition that education cannot be considered in isolation from other key public policies. Stronger linkages are most commonly sought with labour market and social policies, but education is also seen as requiring closer connections with the health, science, and environmental policy areas, among others.

The need for closer policy connections was a major theme when the chief executives of OECD education systems met in Dublin in February 2003. They expressed concern that “education is often not sufficiently connected with other policy developments, and this has negative consequences in both directions”. The chief executives also drew attention to the paradox that “while education is at the centre of the knowledge economy, it is not itself knowledge rich”. They went on to conclude that “there need to be better strategies for knowledge production about education and better connections between researchers and practitioners”.

These concerns are closely related. Fundamental to building better links between education and other policy areas is the education sector’s capacity to clearly articulate its objectives, to demonstrate how these inter-relate with wider social and economic developments, and to identify and implement cost-effective policies and programmes.

Economic and social changes have required education to develop a broadened conception of its role. The goal of achieving lifelong learning for all reflects a commitment to see policy as a connected whole. Education is no longer viewed as being confined largely to the experiences of children and young people, but as an on-going process of skill and knowledge development extending throughout life, and taking place in a wide variety of formal and informal settings. This broadened scope necessitates much closer integration between education, labour and social policies – but also exposes the limitations of the current knowledge base about how to make that work.

The creation of a separate OECD Directorate for Education in September 2002 recognised the central role that lifelong learning now plays in public policy. It also provided an opportunity to review how the OECD’s education programme can help meet the policy challenges ahead. Building on its analyses of the operations of the education sector itself, the programme is placing an increased emphasis on “policy interconnectedness”: trying to improve understanding of the mutual benefits that can flow from closer connections between education and other key policy areas; and using the tools of comparative analysis to identify good international practice in this regard.

The analyses reported in this volume reflect this orientation. Chapter 1 examines the role of education in improving social cohesion by drawing on international data and experience with programmes for students with disabilities, learning difficulties, and disadvantages. Chapter 2 discusses the contribution that new approaches to career guidance can make to the functioning of education systems and labour markets in a lifelong learning framework. Chapter 3 reviews the experiences of OECD countries that are reforming higher education in ways that attempt to balance achieving national economic and social objectives with strengthening the sector’s independence and dynamism. Chapter 4 analyses policy strategies to increase investment in adult learning, which it argues is the weak link in the lifelong learning framework.

Although the chapters indicate that OECD countries share a number of common policy objectives – including lifting education participation by disadvantaged groups, raising the quality of education outcomes, and making education systems more responsive to social and economic needs – there are large differences in the policies and programmes they have adopted. Such differences reflect differences in national contexts, institutional structures, political factors, and resource constraints. However, the policy differences also reflect genuine uncertainties about the appropriate ways forward.

The chapters draw attention to significant limitations in the current knowledge base. Many countries lack analyses that link different types of provision to outcomes for students with disabilities, difficulties and disadvantages (Chapter 1), or that show how well the current suppliers of career education services are serving demand (Chapter 2). There is little analysis available of the impact of new funding and accountability mechanisms in higher education (Chapter 3), or of strategies intended to open up learning opportunities for disadvantaged adults (Chapter 4).

A significant part of the OECD's mission is to work with member countries to help fill such gaps. One contribution to this comes from documenting the range of policy initiatives now underway, whether in the substantive areas covered by the four chapters in this volume, or through the Annex that summarises recent major policy changes across a wide range of education fields in OECD countries. The changes cover the spectrum from early childhood education, through to schooling, tertiary education, adult learning and workplace training.

Comparative analyses of national policies can help countries place their own approaches in a broader perspective, and suggest innovations that they can learn from. Comparative analyses of this sort can also raise questions about long-established practices. For example, Chapter 1 documents substantial differences among OECD countries in how they identify students with special needs and provide for them. The result is that similar types of students can have vastly different educational and social experiences from country to country. And yet, as the chapter shows, there is relatively little information in most countries about the long-term consequences of special needs provision in different settings.

The OECD's work on education indicators, research, and policy reviews is intended to help member countries strengthen the knowledge base in this and other key areas, and to provide a stronger platform for policy development. A major theme of the current programme is finding ways to build connections between education and other areas of socio-economic policy. This will be a feature of the OECD Education Ministers meeting in March 2004 when they discuss policy issues on which an international comparative perspective can add value.

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