



Opening session of the Ministerial meeting of the OECD Education Policy Committee

**Virtual remarks by Mathias Cormann
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Ministers, Ambassadors, Colleagues,

A very warm welcome to this Ministerial meeting of the OECD Education Policy Committee.

While I wish I could join in person, I'm delighted to have the opportunity to share some thoughts with you virtually.

At the heart of your agenda, today, and as Education Ministers every day, is the role which education and skills systems play in securing opportunity-rich, fair and cohesive societies, consistent with our aspiration for strong, sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

Each generation carries an inheritance and a responsibility for the future.

Education is the most tangible investment we make in humanity's future, channelled through the aspirations, hopes and dreams of those who follow us.

This responsibility feels even more palpable and pressing as we look to navigate this era of geopolitical, economic and ecological risk and uncertainty.

Societies confront not just evolutionary socio-economic change, but systemic shocks of often global dimensions.

For those with the right knowledge and skills, the disruptions can be liberating and exciting; but for those who are poorly prepared, they often mean insecure work, and a life with poor prospects.

Unlocking the power of education for human flourishing and mutual understanding in this more connected, but also somewhat more fractious world, is a mission we take very seriously here at the OECD.

So today I would like to offer some opening thoughts about the three themes of your discussion and the declaration you are working towards adopting as an outcome of your meeting.

The first, and central, theme is about the capacity of our education and training systems to foster opportunity, inclusion and sustainable growth amidst rapid change and ongoing fiscal pressures across all societies.

There is no clearer path to a better life based on personal development and social mobility than to give people educational opportunities.

To take one example, for adults with a tertiary qualification, the employment gap between men and women is just 6%. For those without baseline qualifications, at 26%, it is over four times larger.

Increasingly skills-intensive economies and fast-evolving societies are putting greater pressure on education and skills systems to enable **all** people to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will help them live in a world which is constantly changing.

And with economies facing serious headwinds, maintaining funding for our education system will continue to be a challenge – especially as we work to regain lost ground due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our education systems must adapt to a changing world.

Digitalisation is changing the structure of our economies and the way our citizens get information.

Climate change will result in labour market turnover as new businesses and industries replace more carbon-intensive ones.

Population ageing makes it all the more important to improve skills and boost productivity, and to ramp up our commitment to life-long learning, to avoid adverse impacts of population ageing on economic wellbeing.

Even the current geopolitical situation, with the impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the risk of a food crisis in low-income countries and other developments, brings additional pressures on education systems, including from migration flows.

The COVID-19 pandemic in many ways provided an unwanted, yet revealing, 'stress-test' of the strengths and weaknesses of education systems around the world.

It laid bare the stark challenge of inequality of opportunity, both within and between societies, when it came to resources and access to the means of learning.

The pandemic also highlighted the capacity of technology to open up new learning opportunities – including for vulnerable students or those with special needs, through greater personalisation and adaptation, and new techniques.

However, that should not blind us to the risk that unequal access to contemporary learning tools may accelerate progress for those who already start with great advantages, while leaving behind those who do not.

In today's rapidly changing economy, education systems need to improve their ability to anticipate the skills needed in the future. Globalisation and digitalisation mean jobs are becoming more specialised, task-oriented and mobile than ever.

Education and training systems need to respond to the needs and expectations of a new generation of learners while providing lifelong learning opportunities to a population with greater aspirations and needs for learning.

For example, tertiary education systems must be prepared for students looking for new skills at various stages of their careers.

We used to learn to do the work, now learning has become a key part of doing the work.

We must also better integrate the world of learning with the world of work.

Great places of work have become great places of learning, and great places of learning pay close attention to the evolution of labour-demand.

Vocational education and training provides promising answers here and we need to make this a first choice, not a last resort for learners.

The second theme I want to touch on relates to how we can reimagine and develop our education systems to better prepare our young people, including as active citizens within liberal democratic societies.

We cannot be complacent.

Our latest PISA survey found that more than half of 15-year-olds have difficulties distinguishing fact from opinion and navigating the digital world's information blizzard.

In some OECD Member countries, this rises to more than three quarters.

We must equip students with the ability to navigate complex information, and distinguish fact from fiction, at a time when misinformation and dis-information are being used by malign actors to undermine our democratic processes.

Education systems are among our central pillars of social cohesion.

By instilling a common canon of knowledge, shared behaviours and collective social values, education nurtures the shared identities and sense of belonging that unlock active civic engagement in democratic processes.

Finally, I believe passionately that education is an area where we, within the OECD family, must do a much better job of learning from each other. And of integrating education and training policy with wider governance challenges to support the skills needed for the future.

That's why forums like ours today are so vital, and why open discussion about our successes and failures is so important.

So too, we must strive to avoid 'siloed' approaches to today's challenges, in favour of whole-of-government strategies.

Nowhere is this more pressing than the interrelated education, labour market and community cohesion challenges associated with the two big economic transitions of the 21st century – green and digital.

Education and skills policies must be considered alongside regulation, taxation and other economic and social policies as part of a coherent whole.

Closer collaboration across governments and with a wide range of stakeholders will be essential if we are to manage these transitions in a way that supports strong, inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

In closing, our contribution at the OECD will continue to centre on providing actionable data, analysis and evidence-based policy advice.

We will continue to use our convening role to encourage dialogue with a view to developing best practice, international standards.

Your participation here today and the strong commitments made by your *Declaration on Rebuilding Societies Through Education* will help take this dialogue forward.

My best wishes for a positive and productive meeting.

I look forward to carrying today's discussions forward into our Skills Summit in Belgium in a few months and into our next Ministerial Summit on the Teaching Profession in the United States in April.