

Investing in Competencies for All

MEETING OF OECD EDUCATION MINISTERS

Issues for Discussion



ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Introduction: The Knowledge Society and Lifelong Learning

The advent of the knowledge society, coupled with pervasive diffusion of ICT, ageing populations, globalisation and increased cross-border movement of people and ideas, defines the key challenges for education policy for the opening decade of the 21st century. These developments also bring, in their train, new opportunities to foster economic growth and human well-being.

The advent of the knowledge society presents challenges and opportunities.

Lifelong learning strategies can serve as a key instrument for nurturing the knowledge society. They take account of learning over the whole course of a person's life, whether it takes place in formal or informal settings, and recognise the multiplicity of objectives for which it is undertaken – personal, social and economic. They place the learner and learner needs at the centre of policy and stress motivation and the capacity to learn.

Lifelong learning is a means for fostering the knowledge society...

It is five years since OECD Education Ministers adopted "lifelong learning for all" as the guiding framework for their policies. A review of developments in Member countries since then shows that they have embraced the approach at the political level, and some progress has been made in specific sectors [*Education Policy Analysis (EPA) 2001*, Chapter 1]. However, implementation of the goal still leaves a lot to be desired: the evidence shows that lifelong learning is far from being a reality for many citizens (EPA 2001, Chapter 2).

... but achieving it for all is still far from a reality.

The challenges and opportunities of the knowledge society add new urgency to the pursuit of lifelong learning strategies. The background documentation for this meeting has identified a range of key issues and policy directions for pursuing lifelong learning strategies effectively. Three interrelated themes have been selected for discussion by Ministers because they stand out as areas where policy action is the most critical:

Three themes have been selected for discussion.

- how to secure the benefits of lifelong learning for all;
- how best to foster competencies for the knowledge society; and
- how to manage teaching and learning to promote learning throughout life.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of EPA 2001 provide essential background information for these three themes. In addition, two topics (see below) will be covered in lunch discussions: trade in education services; and promoting social values in schools.

Theme 1: Securing the Benefits from Lifelong Learning for All

There is a renewed urgency to tackle the goals of equity and social cohesion.

Pursuing the goal of lifelong learning for all puts a premium on tackling several long-standing dimensions of educational inequities – socio-economic background, community, gender, ethnic and other disadvantages.

Educational opportunities continue to be unevenly distributed...

Even though overall educational levels have improved steadily over the past few decades, the relative position of the disadvantaged groups has often shown little improvement (EPA 2001, Chapter 3). Despite the significant growth in enrolments in tertiary education over recent years, the gaps in rates of participation by socio-economic classes have been largely maintained. Learning opportunities are unevenly distributed in the population, with many gaps (EPA 2001, Chapter 2). About two-thirds of the adult population in most countries does not participate in organised adult learning activities. In most countries, only a minority of children participates in high-quality early childhood education and care provision before age 4.

... and there are new risks.

As jobs expand in high-skilled occupations, there are risks of new skill-based inequalities emerging within the labour market. Higher rates of family break-up and growth in the number of lone-parent families increase the risk of social exclusion. Inequities in access to and use of ICT are reinforcing existing inequities and can give rise to a “digital divide”. For example, data on home access to the Internet show that the poorest households, those with low educational background and some ethnic groups are being left behind in the digital revolution (EPA 2001, Chapter 3). The seriousness of these risks needs to be evaluated and closely monitored.

Some inequities are part of a “vicious circle”...

The “vicious circle” aspect of some educational inequities is a particularly demanding problem. Underachievement starts in early education, continues through tertiary and further education, and persists in the labour market. Participation rates in learning activities by adults in later life, for example, are highly dependent on levels of initial education. Rates of early school leaving and participation rates in quality early childhood education and care services are, in large measure, determined by socio-economic status.

... whose remedies lie in early preventive action, co-ordinated across policy areas.

These vicious circles can be most effectively broken through early preventive action, which can potentially have large payoffs in lower expenditures on social programmes. But such preventive action requires close collaboration between education and a number of other policy areas such as health, social, labour and tax policies.

Resources will need to be better utilised...

Closing the gaps in the provision of lifelong learning for all and ensuring that its benefits and costs are shared more equitably will require better use of existing resources. To achieve this, there is need for better information on the costs and outcomes of alternative teaching and learning approaches, and for greater flexibility of choice regarding what, when, and where to learn.

... and new financial incentives will be needed to mobilise additional resources.

Additional resources may also be needed in most countries if the gaps in provision are to be closed. To mobilise these resources, the incentives for investments in learning would need to be strengthened, in several ways. Learning needs to be linked more closely to earnings (for example, through

increased visibility and portability of informal learning in the labour market). Better mechanisms are needed for assessing and recognising knowledge and skills that have already been acquired. Fiscal mechanisms can be used to make it easier for individuals, their families, and employers to pay the direct and indirect costs of learning out of past and future earnings. Several countries are experimenting with innovative approaches to co-financing, *e.g.* “individual learning accounts” and preferential tax treatments of learning expenditure. Such innovations should be encouraged and evaluated rigorously.

Issues for discussion – Theme 1

- What are the most effective political strategies for strengthening initial education as a means of improving future participation in adult learning?
- What are Ministers' views on the significance of a “digital divide” and how can it best be bridged?
- What are the best strategies for mobilising resources for strengthening the provision of lifelong learning for all?

Theme 2: Fostering Competencies for the Knowledge Society

The knowledge economy is changing the demand for skills and competencies rapidly. Chapter 4 of EPA 2001 documents a rising threshold of skills needed in the knowledge economy. At the same time, many observers argue that the knowledge economy is putting a premium on new skills. Though their precise nature and growth are difficult, as yet, to establish, employer surveys indicate greater emphasis in hiring decisions on new cross-curricular skills such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork and decision-making.

At the same time, new and old skills that are in demand in the labour market must be complemented by skills that help foster the social networks, norms and values (“social capital”) that are essential for well-functioning democracies, with active participation by citizens. They can provide the basic resources of leadership and strong social networks that are often the critical needs of the most deprived communities.

These developments on the demand side raise profound questions about the content, methods, and mechanisms for delivery and assessment of education and training. Parallel to the changes in demand, there is increasing diversity of arrangements and settings for providing learning. Informal settings – the home, the workplace, the community, the Internet and other virtual settings –

The knowledge economy demands rising skill levels and new skills...

... and social skills need cultivation for well-functioning democracies.

Full use should be made of the increasing diversity of settings for learning.

are gaining in importance. It is essential to consider the full range of supply of learning opportunities to exploit the complementarity between different options. Changes will be needed in both the formal education system and informal learning settings.

The bases for some competencies are best laid early in life.

The bases for some of the cross-curricular and social skills required in the knowledge economy and society are best acquired early in life. As noted above, this reinforces the case for high-quality early childhood education and care and early preventive intervention, for example to help combat bullying, violence and other forms of anti-social behaviour in school (Lunch Discussion, Wednesday 4 April). Motivation to learn and the capacity to engage in self-directed learning are also acquired early. In many countries more than 20 per cent of the youth cohort leave secondary education without skills and qualifications that are valued on the labour market. In order to tackle this serious problem, countries are trying to assess and boost the competencies to be developed in initial education and are experimenting with a variety of approaches that combine practical and work-related learning with theoretical instruction.

Promoting quality in the face of increasing diversity of participants poses a challenge.

For providing higher level skills, both academic and vocational, many countries are offering a wider variety of tertiary programmes and learning pathways. As the “massification” of tertiary education proceeds, greater attention would need to be paid to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse clientele. This raises the question of how quality can be improved in the face of increasing diversity of the participants.

Several different sources supply adult learning opportunities...

Skill attainment of adults is a major concern. Recent evidence shows that more than a quarter of the adult population in many OECD countries performs at low literacy levels. Some adult learning needs are being met through the tertiary sector and the school system is involved in many countries in providing learning opportunities for poorly qualified adults. Employers support most of the training for the employed, while governments play a major role in training the unemployed.

... but they need to be adapted to meet the special needs of adults.

Clearly, there are many actors supporting competence development, and there are major challenges in ensuring that provision through the formal sector, the workplace and other settings of informal learning is linked together to cover the diversity of adult learner needs. Evidence shows, for example, that the learning methods and settings commonly used in the formal institutional settings have to be adapted significantly for the needs of such adults.

Learning needs to be measured, recognised, and valued regardless of the settings in which it is acquired.

Clearer articulation is needed between the competencies that are acquired in the formal sector and those that are acquired in informal settings. The two sectors operate largely in isolation, whereas the need is for a continuum of pathways through learning and work. Current measurements of learning are inadequate in dealing with the new competencies, such as cross-curricular skills. There is little experience with practical ways to assess the informal and self-directed learning that is so important for lifelong learning. We need to know more about how learning in the informal sector can be assessed, recognised and linked to other forms of qualifications and skills, so that such learning can be valued and skills made more portable.

It is evident that participation by all would be needed to meet the requirements of competencies for the labour market and active citizenship. With widening participation comes the challenge of maintaining and improving quality standards. Countries are using a variety of accountability and monitoring approaches to improve standards. There are many unanswered questions about the most effective approaches to improving quality in learning systems that reach near-universal participation. Indeed, there is a debate on whether raising system-wide standards is even possible.

Accountability approaches will need to tackle the problem of raising standards in near-universal systems.

Recognition that learning can take place in a wide range of settings and over the life-cycle implies new roles and responsibilities for the many stakeholders – learners, their families, teachers, providers, institutions and organisations, social partners and governments. Policy development is made difficult by the fact that many aspects of lifelong learning do not fall within the mandate of Education Ministries and there are some areas for which no ministry may have responsibility for oversight, provision or participation. Many countries are implementing greater devolution of responsibilities to local and regional levels and greater co-operative action at this level has been achieved in some countries. Some countries have strong traditions of working across agencies, including with organisations outside government. Establishing such co-operative arrangements is harder where such traditions do not exist. Although attempts at copying arrangements from other countries have often not worked well, further effort is needed in assessing which policy lessons can, with modifications, be adapted successfully. Each country needs to look at its own context carefully and consider what is the best way forward.

Policy development is made difficult because roles and responsibilities are unclear.

Issues for discussion – Theme 2

- How are Ministers tackling the emerging need to recognise, assess and value the competencies acquired regardless of the learning settings?
- How can standards be improved as the diversity of learners increases and systems become near-universal in coverage? What role do different accountability and monitoring approaches play in raising standards?
- What are the obstacles faced by Education Ministers in involving government and non-government actors in the pursuit of lifelong learning strategies and how can those best be overcome?

Theme 3: Developing Innovative Teaching and Learning in Schools

Innovative teaching and learning are vital if schools are to lay the foundations of lifelong learning for all. This requires a broad and strategic view of students' needs. It means putting individual diversity at the heart of teaching and learning. And it means involving other sectors and stakeholders in policy-making as well as education authorities.

Innovative teaching and learning are vital in promoting lifelong learning.

The OECD schooling scenarios help develop a strategic view of the needed reforms.

The six possible scenarios for the future of schooling developed in Chapter 5 of EPA 2001 offer one approach to developing a broad strategic view, as they provide tools for policy reflection. While they suggest different hypothetical futures, teachers, ICT and support structures figure prominently in each.

Teachers must be at the heart of reforms.

Teachers are central to schooling. They are even more critical as expectations grow for teaching and learning to become more student-centred and to emphasise active learning. They must be in the vanguard of innovation, including the informed, judicious use of ICT. Teachers must work in collaboration with colleagues and through networks, as well as through active links with parents and the community. This calls for demanding concepts of professionalism: the teacher as facilitator; as knowledgeable, expert individual; as networked team participant, oriented to individual needs; engaged both in teaching and in research and development. The role of the school principal in providing leadership is particularly critical.

Teacher professional development is key.

To meet these objectives, initial teacher training needs to effectively combine knowledge of subject matter and cross-curricular understanding. Building on this, teacher professional development needs to be revamped. Professional development is essential to the core activities of classroom teaching and student guidance, not an optional extra. Integrating professional development into all educational activities creates challenges for educational administrators, school principals and policy makers: not least to ensure adequate resources, particularly of time and infrastructure.

Making teaching an attractive profession is a major challenge.

Making teaching more attractive, for both present and future teachers, becomes a more urgent policy concern in the face of teacher shortages. Attractiveness is fostered by many factors – recognition, conditions, rewards, professional development, shared ethos – and is as relevant for practising teachers as it is for potential recruits. A key challenge for policy makers is to meet demands for higher quality teaching, and at the same time to address looming teacher shortages, especially if they were to become so severe as to result in the system “meltdown” described in one of the schooling scenarios in EPA 2001.

The benefits of investing in ICT for schools remain unrealised or unproven.

Governments, schools, families, individuals, and the private sector are making huge investments in ICT for education: in 1999 an estimated \$16 billion across all OECD countries. Expectations are high that this will improve not only technological literacy but also school quality. While evaluations of the impact of this investment remain rare, evidence does suggest that as yet ICT is under-exploited in promoting new approaches to teaching and learning: for example, cross-curricula skills; networking; co-operative projects.

Investment in hardware and software needs to be complemented by investment in the skills of educators.

For hopes of better learning to be realised, investments in hardware and software need to be complemented by investments in organisations and people, including in teacher competence and confidence. The challenge is to identify how all in education – teachers and students, school and community leaders and parents – can work with ICT to enhance teaching and learning. Partnerships will be need to be strengthened, between education, the private sector and the community, and between the different levels, especially secondary and tertiary education. There is also a clear need to understand the educational implications of the Internet much more fully – both its benefits and the problems it can pose.

Teaching and learning do not take place in isolation. They rely on the broader environment to encourage innovation, provide supportive expertise, and give direction through leadership. The trend in most countries towards greater decentralisation and school-level autonomy requires policies to foster this environment: to help create a rich infrastructure of advice, knowledge, intermediaries, and networking opportunities. Policies are also needed to foster leadership, including through better training for school principals. It will be important to encourage mobility between practising teachers and these different structures of leadership and support in order to avoid many of the best teachers permanently leaving the classroom.

Creating a rich environment of leadership and support is an essential task of policy.

Issues for discussion – Theme 3

- What are the major challenges facing school systems and how can Ministers create an environment of leadership and support to promote the most desirable scenario for the future of schooling?
- What can be done to make teaching an attractive profession and integrate professional development as a continuous part of all teachers' work?
- How can the potentially powerful uses of ICT be more fully exploited and recognised to improve teaching and learning?

Lunch Discussion – Tuesday 3 April 2001

Trade in education services: benefits and risks

There is increasing engagement of students, particularly in tertiary education, with providers from outside their own countries. Students move across borders to a supplier. Suppliers move across borders, physically or electronically, to reach new groups of students. Some countries pursue the movement for the cultural benefit to the students. Others pursue it for the financial benefit to the supplier. National quality control of learning experiences and of credentials is challenged by these developments. There is a need to assess the benefits and risks to students, suppliers and the society, especially if the rules governing trade in education services were to be altered in the WTO as part of the on-going discussions on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), and to clarify options for government policy.

Issues for discussion

Are there "win-win" options that achieve both the cultural benefits of exchange for students and financial benefits for suppliers or is that a vain hope? Can governments exercise quality control over the programmes undertaken by their students with foreign suppliers, or must the market be the arbiter?

Lunch Discussion – Wednesday 4 April 2001

Promoting positive social values in schools

Bullying, violence and other forms of anti-social behaviour are a continuing problem in schools. There is concern with the levels of disaffection and alienation of young people from education but also from social life more generally. While these problems cannot be solved by schools alone, education systems are grappling with the question of how best to develop positive social and democratic values and attitudes among pupils. At the school level, policies are being developed in collaboration between school authorities, students and parents, communal youth institutions and, in some cases, with the police. At the system level, support strategies, including the use of social workers, are being implemented and consideration is being given to the potential for curriculum reform to deal more directly with the development of the desirable values and attitudes.

Issues for discussion

How serious are problems of disaffection and violence in schools? What kinds of strategies can be used to promote more positive social values among pupils?

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