Education and skills

WHY IS INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION IMPORTANT FOR DEVELOPMENT?

Progress in education, training, and human resource development are essential for achieving sustained economic growth and poverty reduction, and for responding to the changes in technology and demographics that are re-shaping labour markets. Education improves productivity, employability, nutrition and healthcare, and general prosperity. Education systems need to provide equitable opportunities – starting in early childhood and continuing throughout life. They need to equip people with knowledge, skills and tools to stay competitive and engaged. Within this broad framework, specific targets on primary education are set out in the MDGs: universal primary education and the elimination of gender disparity in primary education. There is a strong link between the gender disparity target and other topics: lack of education for girls contributes to high adolescent birth rates, jeopardising health and holding back social and economic advancement.

The MDGs have stimulated significant increases in spending by governments, and have increased support from the wider international community. Education frequently accounts for a large share of GDP in developing countries, in some cases consuming up to one-third of national budgets. Major advances have been made in getting more children into primary school, including in many of the poorest countries in the world. Whilst challenges still remain, there is now a growing focus on the issue of the quality of education provided, and on the linkages between education and employment – how the education system can help develop job-related skills needed to match employer and market needs. There are also increasing concerns about the implications of large youth cohorts that can put education and training systems under significant stress and also lead to a rapidly-expanding labour supply that economic growth and job creation cannot match, resulting in high youth unemployment.

Governments need to take the lead in addressing these challenges, both in setting the right policy frameworks and in providing the necessary public resources. The international community has an important supporting role to play in providing additional financial resources and expertise. The sharing of evidence and good practice between diverse systems is also extremely valuable.

Key areas for wider international co-operation are:

- developing internationally comparable ways of measuring the quality of education at all levels;
- identifying gaps between education systems and labour market needs;
- promoting internationally accepted quality assurance standards at higher and vocational levels.

WHERE ARE WE NOW AND WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT?

(i) Measuring quality

Reliable comparative international data is essential for measuring quality. Instruments exist at secondary but not other levels. The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is

a triennial internationally standardised assessment jointly developed by participating countries which reports on the educational performance of 15-year-olds. PISA assesses how far students have acquired the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society. The results of the latest survey covering 65 countries from both OECD and non-member economies were published in December 2010. Surveys have revealed wide differences in the quality of learning outcomes across countries, as well as in the capacity of countries to moderate social inequalities, with only a weak relationship between education expenditures and student performance. There are, however, no corresponding quality measurement tools at primary or higher levels, though the OECD Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) programme is designing criteria to measure outcomes at this level on an international scale.

The next step is:

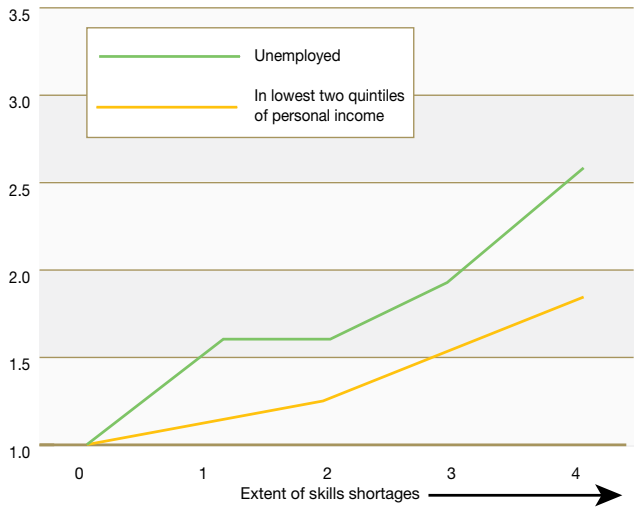
• additional work to improve data and develop internationally comparable means of measuring quality and outcomes at the primary level, and to assess higher education learning outcomes.

(ii) Identifying gaps between education systems and labour market needs

Education at all levels is critical in order to develop a skilled labour force, attract domestic and inward investment, deliver public services, and foster innovation. Investment in adult and vocational training is often insufficient, bypassing the informal sectors, with weak links to employment markets. There has been a recent focus in the G20 process on the importance of employment-related skills better matched to employer and market needs as key components of overall growth and labour market strategies. International organisations, including the OECD, have been asked to examine comparable indicators of skills for employment in developing countries, including low-income countries (see also Topic 14), to assist them in identifying gaps in their education systems for basic-level employable skills, and to identify links between education, health, gender gaps, and lifelong skills development.

How poor skills raise the risk of economic and social disadvantage (16-65 years-olds)

Increased likehood of unemployment, low income



Source: OECD staff, using data from Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

The next step is:

• interim reporting from international organisations to the 2012 G20 Summit on development of comparable skills indicators, linking this to gaps in education systems.

(iii) Promoting internationally accepted quality assurance standards

Internationally accepted standards can contribute to improving the quality of education. Whilst National Qualification Frameworks exist in a number of developing countries, as well as at the regional level (African, Arabic, etc.), there is no consistency of criteria across countries. This is true also for cross-border educational services, which have been growing and have the potential to be an important component of national capacity building and development strategies if managed well and of consistent quality. The UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education have begun to address this issue.

The next step is:

• working towards international validity and portability of qualifications in a way which generates positive spillovers rather than contributing to skill-drain.

HOW CAN THE OECD, WORKING WITH OTHER INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, HELP TO ACHIEVE THIS?

The OECD provides comparative data and analysis on education policy-making to help build efficient and effective educational systems and improve learning outcomes. Its statistics and indicators, published annually, provide a strong evidence base for international comparisons of all aspects of education systems. Its policy analyses facilitate peer learning across countries as new policy options are explored and experiences compared. Its future-oriented educational research helps shape policy agendas by identifying upcoming issues while drawing upon the overall breadth of the OECD's policy work. The OECD publishes country reviews of education policies in over 40 OECD and partner countries. It collaborates closely with UNESCO and multilateral and regional development banks.

This has proved to be a powerful combination for supporting education reform efforts and interventions globally. More specifically, the OECD will further contribute to the above priorities as follows:

(i) Measuring quality

Continuing discussions with UNESCO on the extension of PISA to 9-year-olds; broadening its new work on Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) to benefit emerging and developing countries; and extend its education policy reviews to a wider group of emerging and developing countries.

(ii) Identifying gaps between education systems and labour market needs

Continuing to co-operate with UNESCO on the role of post-secondary and tertiary vocational education in paving pathways to jobs as part of the Vocational Education and Training project; continuing work with the EU on the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which covers the linkages between education, skills and the labour market; launching of work on a new 'Skills Strategy' in co-operation with the ILO to examine the links between skills, better jobs and higher productivity and how they feed into better jobs, higher productivity and ultimately better economic and social outcomes; drawing together lessons from the policy analysis in the OECD reports on Jobs for Youth and Learning for Jobs and extending and tailoring this analysis to address the particular challenges facing emerging economies, including large youth cohorts arriving on the labour market; and carrying out pilot country reviews of emerging economies to deliver policy advice.

(iii) Promoting internationally accepted quality assurance standards

Improving quality standards internationally, such as through the Guidelines on Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education, developed jointly by UNESCO and the OECD. The Guidelines are designed to promote access to information on higher education services offered abroad, or by foreign providers in a particular country.

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