



Fostering Relevant Skills and Employability Through Education

CHAIR'S SUMMARY

INFORMAL MEETING OF OECD
MINISTERS OF EDUCATION

OECD EĞİTİM BAKANLARI
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Chair's Summary

I have had the privilege of chairing this informal meeting of 26 Ministers from OECD and other countries which Turkey is proud to have hosted.

It is no exaggeration to use the word “revolution” when talking about how our lives have changed over the past few decades. Today we rely on information and communication technologies and devices that hadn't even been imagined in 1980. The way we live and work has changed profoundly –and so has the set of skills we need to participate fully in and benefit from our hyper-connected societies and increasingly knowledge-based economies. In all our countries, education and skills transform lives and drive economies. Without the right skills, people are kept on the margins of society, technological progress does not translate into economic growth, and countries cannot compete in today's economies. At the same time, the emergence of the knowledge society means that we have unprecedented opportunities in shaping the position of our countries in global value chains, and effective skills policies will be at the heart of this. Effective skills policies will also need to be at the centre of efforts to helping vulnerable people, organizations and systems persist, perhaps even thrive, amid unforeseeable disruptions. Skills can provide communities, institutions and infrastructure with greater flexibility, intelligence and responsiveness to rapid economic and social changes.

But we also see that more education does not automatically translate into better economic and social outcomes: in some countries many graduates are unemployed, while employers say that they cannot find the people with the skills they need. The challenge for us is to develop the right skills in effective and equitable ways, and to convert these skills into better jobs and better lives.

To achieve this, governments need a clear picture to anticipate the evolution of skill demand, and of the extent to which their citizens are equipping themselves with the skills demanded in the 21st century. OECD's international work in education has become an essential part of that picture.

This meeting has given us the opportunity to reflect on first results from OECD's innovative Survey of Adult Skills and to explore effective policies and practices to develop relevant skills and ensure both their effective supply and a better match with demand. It has also allowed us to shape the future of PISA, which in turn has shaped and transformed policy-making in education over the past 15 years.

Opening the meeting, Prime Minister Erdogan reminded us of the moral imperative of providing all people with adequate educational opportunities so that they can participate fully in economic and social life, and the example of Turkey illustrated the impressive progress that can be achieved in education if the ambitions are right and backed up with appropriate resources.

At our working lunch, representatives from business and industry joined us to exchange views on the role the social partners can play in education and training programmes. The session made clear that effective skills policies need to be everybody's business, as one Minister put it, they do not only require a whole-of-government approach, but a whole-of-society commitment. Designing effective skills policies therefore requires more than co-ordinating different sectors of public administration and aligning different levels of government. A broad range of non-governmental actors, including employers, professional and industry associations and chambers of commerce, trade unions, education and training institutions and, of course, individuals must also be involved. We also recognise that we need to work harder on addressing the tough question of who should pay for what, when and how, particularly for learning beyond school, and we value OECD's work on effectiveness and efficiency in education as a way to move this discussion forward. We contend that employers can do more to create a climate that supports learning, and invest in learning and heard promising examples of systems where employers are engaged. Some individuals can and may need to shoulder more of the financial burden. Governments can design more rigorous standards, provide financial incentives, and create a safety net so that all people have access to the high-quality education and training that some enjoy today. Employers and trade unions can also play an important role in shaping education and training, to make it relevant to the current needs of the labour market but also to ensure that workers' broader employability is enhanced.

The Survey of Adult Skills

We then discussed initial findings from OECD's Survey of Adult Skills. We warmly welcome the survey, we expect the survey's release on 8 October to trigger a much-needed debate on how human capital contributes to economic and social development and focus attention on where improvement is needed, and we believe the survey has the potential to transform the global debate on skills in similar ways as PISA did for school policy. We invite the OECD to work with countries to analyse the implications of the survey for policy and practice. We also welcome efforts underway to extend OECD's learning metrics and assessments to both vocational education and higher education.

We have seen from the survey results that what people know, and what they do with what they know, has a major impact on their life chances, and that this impact goes far beyond earnings and employment. We note that in all countries surveyed, individuals with poorer foundation skills are far more likely than those with advanced literacy skills to report poor health, to believe that they have little impact on political processes, and not to participate in associative or volunteer activities. We invite the OECD to further examine the nature and mix of the skills that will enable individuals to be successful, both in the short and longer-term.

We note the close link between the quality of initial education and subsequent educational and occupational pathways, which underlines the importance for all children to have a strong start in education. Investing in high-quality early childhood education and initial schooling, particularly for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, has proved to be the most efficient strategy to ensure that individuals become effective lifelong learners. The impressive progress that some countries have made in improving the skills of their population over successive generations shows what we can achieve.

While we cannot change the past - and we recognise that much of the results from the Survey of Adult Skills reflect the past of our school systems - policies designed to provide high-quality lifelong opportunities for learning can help to ensure that the adults of the future maintain their skills. We have seen from the Survey of Adult Skills that individuals with poor skills are unlikely to engage in education and training on their own initiative and tend to receive less employer-sponsored training. We therefore need to establish more effective second-chance options that offer them a way out of the low-skills/low-income trap. We have also seen from the survey results that some countries have been much better than others in establishing systems that combine high-quality initial education with opportunities and incentives for the entire population to continue to develop

proficiency in reading and numeracy skills after the completion of initial education and training, whether outside work or at the workplace. We need to ensure that the most disadvantaged adults need to be not only offered, but also encouraged, to improve their proficiency. This means identifying low-skilled adults who require support, particularly foreign-language immigrants, older adults and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and providing them with learning opportunities tailored to their needs. This is likely to require innovative approaches and significant community engagement.

We have seen that skills development can be highly relevant and effective if the world of learning and the world of work are linked. Learning in the workplace allows young people to develop “hard” skills on modern equipment, and “soft” skills, such as teamwork, communication and negotiation, through real-world experience. Hands-on workplace training can also help to motivate disengaged youth to stay in or re-engage with the education system and makes the transition from education into the labour market smoother. We have been encouraged by examples from countries where such linkages have been successfully established. We need to find an appropriate balance between not tracking students too early, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, providing flexibility and personalisation in education systems so that individuals can find the pathways that best meet their needs. We see more relevant learning also as the key to motivate disengaged youth to re-engage with education and smooth the transition to work and to lower what, in many of our countries, are still unacceptably high rates of school dropout. We welcome OECD’s work on vocational education and training and encourage the OECD to develop insights on how we can make vocational education more attractive for students, and more attractive to employers.

We consider that programmes to enhance adult information-processing skills need to be relevant to users and flexible enough, both in content and in how they are delivered (part-time, flexible hours, convenient location) to adapt to adults’ needs. Distance learning and the open educational resources approach can also allow users to adapt their learning to their lives.

We need to find ways to make the benefits of adult skill development more transparent. More adults will be tempted to invest in education and training if the benefits of improving their skills are made apparent to them. We can provide better information about the economic benefits, including wages net of taxes, employment and productivity, and non-economic benefits, including self-esteem and increased social interaction, of adult learning. A combination of easily searchable, up-to-date online information and personal guidance and counselling services to help individuals define their own training needs and identify the appropriate programmes has often made a real difference

Last but not least, providing recognition and certification of competencies can facilitate and encourage adult learners to undertake continued education and training. Transparent standards, embedded in a framework of national qualifications, and reliable assessment procedures are important instruments to this end. Recognising prior learning can also reduce the time needed to obtain a certain qualification and, thus, the cost in foregone earnings. OECD’s assessments provide a valuable framework to support national efforts in this direction.

We agree that cross-border skills policies are important: several of our countries do not have an adequate supply of skills and increasingly attract migrant labour. We recognise, however, that children of migrants often underperform at school. We need to ensure that their skills are developed and utilised and that they are enabled to integrate fully into society and the labour market.

The future of PISA

We acknowledged the **unique nature of PISA as a tool for policy making**, in particular that:

- PISA has become a powerful tool to track how countries advance in raising quality and improving equity in education.
- It measures the ability of 15-year-old students to use their knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges.
- But we have also discussed many reform efforts that show that PISA is far more than a test of key skills: its policy orientation is also one of its main features. For example, it draws attention to differences in performance patterns, can help identify the characteristics of schools and education systems that have high performance standards, and can shed light on students' motivation and learning strategies. As some Ministers noted, PISA has also been a powerful tool to build consensus on difficult policy issues by reducing ideological biases in national debates.
- The three-year PISA cycle enables countries to monitor progress in meeting learning objectives over time.

We noted some of the **key messages that have emerged from PISA so far**:

- PISA has shown that, **while money is important, it is not enough to secure high quality education**. The data shows that money explains less than 20% of the performance differences among countries. In other words, PISA shows that two countries with similar spending can produce very different educational results.
- Perhaps most importantly, PISA has revealed a surprising number of features which the world's most successful school systems, the so-called "Top Performers" all share:
- Their citizens are encouraged by their leaders to make choices that value education and their future, more than consumption.
- There is a **genuine belief that all children can achieve**. In some countries, students are segregated at early ages, reflecting the notion that only some children can achieve world class standards. In countries like Finland or Japan parents and teachers are committed to make sure that all students achieve high standards. Not only that, but they embrace diversity with differentiated instructional practices, recognising that ordinary students have extraordinary talents.
- They share **clear and ambitious standards across the board**. Everyone knows what is required to get a given qualification.
- They **pay attention to how they select and train their teachers**, taking time to improve the performance of teachers who are struggling and to structure teachers' pay. They provide an environment in which teachers work together to frame good practice. And they provide intelligent pathways for teachers to grow in their careers.
- They support their teachers to find new and innovative ways to teach, to improve their own performance and that of their colleagues, and to pursue professional development that leads to stronger educational practice. The goal in the past was standardisation and compliance, but top performers enable teachers to be inventive. They also prioritise the quality of teachers over the size of classes, which is challenging popular wisdom.

- Perhaps the most impressive outcome of world class school systems is that they deliver **high quality across the entire school system so that every student benefits from excellent learning**. You have seen that Finland is doing very well on PISA, but what makes Finland really special is that only 5% of the performance variation among students depends on schools. Every school succeeds. To achieve this, these countries invest resources where they can make the most of difference; they attract the strongest principals to the toughest schools and the most talented teachers to the most challenging classrooms.
- Last but not least, high performing systems tend to align policies and practices across all aspects of the system; they make them coherent over sustained periods of time, and they ensure that they are consistently implemented.

We welcomed the progress that had been made in driving PISA forward and recognised areas for improvement, in particular that:

- **PISA has proved appealing to a growing number of countries:** from 33 countries in the first round, to almost 80 now. And from the very beginning the PISA programme has evolved, exploiting technology and extending the assessment to include thinking and problem-solving skills. But there are areas where we can do better.
- We will need to work harder to **embrace a wider range of globally relevant knowledge and skills** that are key to the future success of students and can drive innovation in economies - while at the same time recognising the value of foundation skills in reading, mathematics and science. Ministers asked to pay more attention to social, cultural awareness and non-cognitive skills which strengthen students' engagement in learning and improves well-being. Ministers highlighted the importance of foreign languages skills and entrepreneurial skills and countries are encouraging us to pay closer attention to vocational skills which have so far been left out of the picture.
- Some Ministers have underlined the importance of achieving greater regional and local differentiation in the PISA results.
- It is vital that we **further develop the dual impact of PISA** - as a tool which tells us where our countries stand, and how they are progressing. But we also need to ensure that PISA provides actionable insights to inform policy and practice and stimulate further improvements in quality, equity and efficiency of education. To achieve this we need to establish better links between PISA and other sources of international and national evidence. We also need to find ways to more closely integrate PISA with national educational standards and evaluation systems.
- We need to **make sure that the picture PISA provides of education better reflects the perspectives of all stakeholders**, students, teachers, parents, policy-makers and the business sector. The quality of education will never exceed the quality of teachers, so linking the results from PISA more closely with the work of teachers will help us identify ways in which we can improve teaching and the organisation of school.

To achieve all of this, we need find ways to make PISA more adaptable and flexible to the priorities of participating countries, and we encourage the PISA Governing Board to work towards this goal.

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