

French EU Presidency Conference
International comparison of education systems: A European model

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The key role of indicators and benchmarks supporting the future strategic objectives of European co-operation in education and training

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1. Policy development and the use of indicators and benchmarks

I am very grateful that the French Presidency has organised this conference and for having the opportunity to speak here. The conference has underlined the importance of reliable and quality indicators for the comparison of education and training systems and for evidence based policy making in general. The conference can be seen as an important step for a better coordination between different survey initiatives. I am sure you can all agree that the French presidency's efforts in organising this conference have been really worthwhile.

Since Lisbon in 2000, indicators have played an important role in the cooperation between EU Member States and the Commission in the field of education and training. Along with peer learning, they are a key element of the open method of coordination (OMC), launched with the Lisbon process and have helped to measure national reforms and progress towards our agreed European objectives.

As you all know, the Council adopted 5 European benchmarks in 2003. It also agreed in 2007 a coherent framework of 16 core indicators. Based on these, the Commission has since 2004 produced annual reports on progress towards the Lisbon objectives – Education and Training. The latest was published in summer this year. I would urge you all to use these reports.

That this monitoring work is taken seriously was confirmed by the 2008 Spring European Council. Based on the insufficient progress made, European heads of state and government urged Member States to take concrete action to reduce substantially the number of people who cannot read properly and the number of early school leavers. They insisted on the need to improve the achievement levels of learners with a migrant background or from other disadvantaged groups.

This shows how the monitoring of performance provides crucial input into policy development at the highest level and – I hope – eventually also leads to action on the ground and to better outcomes.

I would like to give you an overview of what is in the pipeline for the future. The Commission is currently reflecting on an update of our current framework for European cooperation in Education and Training and is planning to publish a Communication on this in mid-December. Based on a broad consultation of Member States and key stakeholders, we have identified four broad strategic

challenges which should guide European education and training cooperation over the next few years:

- Making lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality
- Improving the quality and efficiency of provision and outcomes
- Promoting equity and active citizenship
- Enhancing innovation and creativity, including entrepreneurship

In this context, discussions have also started to update and develop our benchmarks for the period post 2010. We have to think about how the strategic challenges could be reflected in an updated set of benchmarks.

Among the issues to be addressed is the extension of the current set of benchmarks to areas such as pre-primary education, language learning or the attainment of tertiary level qualifications. These are areas where we already have concrete suggestions for possible benchmarks, and also have the underlying data, or will have it shortly. But there are also areas where serious development work will need to be done. Here I am thinking in particular of the areas of learner mobility throughout Europe, employability, and innovation and creativity.

And I very much hope that we will be able use the European year of innovation and creativity in 2009 to explore the possibility of developing an indicator on

the important area of creativity. I am of course counting on your support in this development work!

2. University ranking

An important area this conference has addressed is higher education and more specifically the ranking of higher education institutions.

The Shanghai and the Times Higher Education ranking have been very much in the media in the last years. But they look at higher education institutions mainly from the research point of view, while we, with our perspective, are also interested in dimensions like teaching, innovation, regional integration and internationalisation.

That is why the Commission has in the past supported a pilot survey on the extension of the multi-dimensional CHE ranking to other countries and why we will launch a call for tender to test the feasibility of a European framework for the assessment of the performance of universities, and it is why we support a pilot project on the classification of universities, which will provide an important basis for comparing institutions.

We therefore endorse the French Presidency conclusions on the mapping of Higher Education Institutions and the standards for European ranking proposed therein.

3. Development of new indicators

In line with policy priorities, the last decade has seen a strong growth in the availability of education and training data.

Nevertheless some gaps remain as is shown by a comparison with existing data of the Coherent Framework of Indicators that was adopted by the Council in May 2007. Missing data sets mainly relate to key competencies. Many of the 8 competences listed in the recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on key competences are hence not yet covered by statistical data.

Nevertheless great progress in measuring skills has already been achieved and more is in the pipeline.

The PISA reading data form part of the EU benchmark on low achievers. The Commission is co-financing the participation of EU Member States in the PIAAC survey on adult skills. The same is true for the OECD TALIS survey on teachers. An OECD survey on the competences of tertiary students (AHELO) is furthermore in the pipeline.

The Commission is also cooperating with the **IEA** to cover data needs on the civic skills of pupils, including through co-financing.

In areas where no international activities exist yet, the Commission is launching new surveys. An EU financed **language survey** on the language skills of 14 to

16 year olds will be carried out in Europe in 2011 and data will become available early 2012. The survey will provide data for the future European indicator on language competencies. This ambitious survey will provide decision makers and educational staff with information that will help to improve language teaching in Europe.

As you've heard from Anders, on measuring **learning to learn competences** -a very complex area -we are also moving forward. Surveying these competences among young people is a big challenge. With the backing of the Council, we have developed a suitable instrument which was piloted in eight European countries in 2008 (including France) demonstrating the potential of a full-scale European survey in this field. We are now preparing next steps towards a European Survey on "learning to learn" competences including bringing together national experts to support and advise the Commission.

The activities listed above show that the number of surveys being carried out or in the pipeline is tending to increase. The growing number of surveys unavoidably also puts increasing financial and organisational strains on national administrations, especially on those of smaller countries. There have therefore been calls for a better coordination of these initiatives in terms of timing, compatibility and methodological approach. This conference was a first and useful step in this direction. Another conference on the secondary analysis of survey results is foreseen for 2009. The Commission will advance its initiatives

for a better coordination of survey calendars and contents with the OECD and the IEA in order to avoid overlaps, enhance synergies and increase cost-efficiency.

In conclusion, the crucial point is, of course, that these surveys will provide us with much more of the data needed for the improvement of policies which are based on solid evidence. The effort put into collecting and analysing the data can give us high returns in terms of improving education and training, on which EU Member States are currently spending about 500 billion Euro per year. But we will only get these high returns if we cooperate at European level and between Member States and stakeholders in order to analyse what is behind the data: the reasons and critical factors which influence the data in terms of indicators and benchmarks. This is the whole purpose of European cooperation in Education and Training and especially of peer learning and exchange of good practice.

The improvement of education and training systems can yield great benefits for the economy, for each individual and for society as a whole. Close cooperation on indicators and benchmarks supported by exchange of good practice leading to the reform of Education and Training systems should help us to actually see and enjoy these benefits one day. Thank you.