

## The Five Challenges to the Quality of Education in Europe

**Source:** Excerpt from European *Report on the Quality of school Education Sixteen Quality indicators*. Report based on the work of the Working Committee on Quality Indicators, European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture, May, 2000.  
<http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/indic/rapinen.pdf>

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The new millennium may be only a symbolic change of date but it marks an important stage for policy-makers in European countries. It encourages us to look to the future and turn our attention to the challenges, which that future presents. For policy-makers, the challenge will be to stay in touch with, and ahead of, national and transnational movements, which will change the face of Europe and impact on national systems of education. We have identified five key challenges for the future:

- The knowledge challenge
- The challenge of decentralisation
- The resource challenge
- The challenge of social inclusion
- The challenge of data and comparability.

### The knowledge challenge

The challenge of the knowledge society brings us back to the essential purposes of school education, in relation to the world of work, to social life and lifelong learning. The information explosion demands fundamental rethinking of traditional conceptions of knowledge, its 'transmission', 'delivery' by teachers and 'acquisition' by students. It raises questions about the assessment and testing of knowledge and the more demanding resources of skills, attitudes and motivation to learn. It questions curriculum content and the prioritisation and compartmentalisation of 'subjects'.

Reading, mathematics and science claim their place as indicators because they provide essential knowledge tools and provide the foundations for lifelong learning skills. Less easily measurable competencies in civics, foreign languages and ICT will be no less significant in the future. Least developed of all, in terms of the indicator areas presented in this report, are learning to learn skills but, arguably, they may be the most critical and enduring of competencies in the society of the third millennium.

All of these areas of knowledge and skills present major challenges for the teaching profession and to the content of teaching in initial and in-service training. Indicators in these areas do not provide the answer but do raise critical questions about how and where teachers should be trained in the future and how continuing professional development can be ensured.

Change requires rethinking, reappraisal; re-evaluation of accepted practices, challenging what has always been done and accepted. Change often requires both restructuring and re-culturing of organisations. It imposes new demands on hierarchies, status and relationships. It may unsettle teachers and puzzle parents who have cast schools in the mould of what they knew.

However, as the examples of promising practice show, these challenges are being met. Initiatives are underway to up-skill teachers, to exploit new technologies, to break new ground in learning to learn competencies. Meeting the knowledge challenge means learning from the good and implementing the best.

### **The challenge of decentralisation**

During the last two decades, many European educational systems have devolved more autonomy and responsibility to schools, bringing increasing demands for accountability at school and, in some cases, classroom level. The scale and rate of decentralisation has been very different within European countries. In some (for example, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom), schools have acquired a large measure of autonomy, while in Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Finland and Sweden most decisions are now taken at school level. In Italy, a reform, which involves a great deal of school autonomy, has been mooted since 1997. In Austria, reforms in 1993–94 enhanced the autonomy of the schools. The trend to devolve decision-making to the school level is a high stakes political strategy, the result in part of a lack of trust in the State's capacity to respond adequately to all the needs of an increasingly demanding population. It has been argued so that those most concerned with the outcome of a decision are in the best position to take the decisions that most directly affect them. In a sense, decentralisation is a means of taking the political debate on quality down to lower levels of the education system.

In doing so it raises questions about comparability, equity, quality assurance and inspection. Empowering stakeholders at lower levels means making them responsible for defining what they understand by quality in education and giving them 'ownership' of their part in the education system.

The process of decentralisation is often seen as both positive and inevitable, but with its own attendant problems. Since it is the responsibility of the State to provide quality education for all, there needs to be some guarantee so that the system is indeed fulfilling those objectives. Decentralisation by its very nature leads to greater differences in standards among schools. The policy challenge is to acknowledge that those differences exist; to ensure that those differences are turned to opportunities and that they do not hinder pupils in achieving their full potential.

It has been argued that centralised systems, which prescribe and control education inputs (curriculum, form content, etc.) need less monitoring and control than decentralised systems, which place less emphasis on the control of input and require greater emphasis on the control of output. A closer look at indicators on the steering and evaluation of systems does not entirely support such a contention but does reveal quite divergent systems enveloping apparently similar practices.

### **The resource challenge**

For many people within the educational systems, the solution to the pressures of change is more resources. Education is increasingly being viewed around the world as investment. While opening up choice to consumers in new educational markets, the economic imperative is for cost-effective alternatives to expensive institutional practices. Technology will become cheaper and widely accessible while professional manpower will become scarcer and costlier, in both a social and economic sense. The indicator on numbers of

computers per pupil is already dated as schools experience rapid increases in provision. The real challenge lies in the most intelligent and cost-effective use and deployment of new technologies.

In most European countries there are twin trends, which increase resource demands at both ends of the compulsory schooling. More and more people are using the education system for a longer and longer period of their lives, thus increasing resource demands on education. Enrolment in further and higher education is increasing steadily. At the other end of the education system, pre-school education is becoming more and more common and, although its nature and timing is a debated issue, there is wide agreement that early childhood experiences have a determining influence on intelligence, on personal development and on subsequent social integration. However desirable and however much investment in early childhood represents long-term investment, these accelerating trends also bring pressure on resource provision and require creative policy thinking.

As provision becomes less institutionalised, individuals will need to adapt by assembling their own qualifications, their own building blocks of knowledge, on the job, in more informal ways or in new contexts still to be identified. Learning throughout life is becoming the key to controlling one's future on both a professional and a personal level, making it possible to participate more actively in society.

Again, policy-makers will benefit from data which monitors important trends, but beyond the numbers and graphics lie issues about the nature and effectiveness of provision and the need for more and better data, sensitive enough to inform decision-making in these areas.

### **The challenge of social inclusion**

All European education systems aim to be inclusive, to offer children and young people the opportunity to benefit from school education and to prepare them for life after school.

No system is entirely successful in achieving these aims and all countries recognise the increasing magnitude of the task. It is becoming all the more challenging because many young people see school structures, curricula and the learning environment as uncongenial or irrelevant to their lives. For many there is no apparent incentive from home or community to go to school and no benefit from attending on a regular basis. All Member States are realising that the future brings a monumental challenge to traditional structures of educational institutions. This means finding ways of educating people beyond school and outside the classroom, helping them acquire the skills and competencies, which will make them less vulnerable in the global economy. The European pilot project 'Second chance schools', which presently counts 13 schools in 11 Member States, addresses this problem by showing that those young people who have left education without the basic skills necessary to find jobs and permit integration can be reintegrated through individualised education and training schemes in close cooperation with local employers.

The civics indicator provides one measure of social inclusion. It reminds us of how 'foreigners', however defined, are perceived, and suggests that it is for social agencies and schools in particular to address this issue. Attitudes towards foreigners can be affected not simply through the context of the curriculum, but through the very structures and culture of schools themselves.

This indicator is a reminder that the relationship between school and society is a vital ingredient in policy-making. Policy-makers need to know the answers to questions such as

the following.

1. What implicit and explicit messages do schools convey on social inclusion?
2. Where is the system losing young people — and why?
3. Where are the problems most acute?
4. Where can we identify successes in engaging and retaining young people?
5. What are the alternatives for the future?

### **The challenge of data and comparability**

The challenge of comparability is to create an open and positive climate for dialogue. Comparison which is perceived as unfair becomes detrimental to the positive and constructive use of benchmark data. The obvious place to start is with standards attained by children at school — their outcomes on leaving school, their acquisition of basic skills at key stages of development.

Data on pupil attainment at given ages is, however, of limited use to policy-making without knowledge of the conditions in which attainment is raised, and of limited value without an understanding of factors which contribute to good teaching and effective learning.

This raises the question of the availability of comparative data. Many indicators in this report clearly lack sufficient data to support a policy discussion and to enable the identification of good practices. Problems related to data have been identified and are listed below.

- The problem of obtaining data for all the countries involved. In only three cases have we been able to show full coverage of all the 26 countries involved by using Eurydice data. These are the indicators covering parents' participation, ICT usage and evaluation, and monitoring systems. The extension of the Eurostat UOE data collection and Labour Force Survey to all these countries is ongoing (five statistical indicators).
- The problem of a lack of data in relation to specific indicators. The report is not currently supported by data on attainment in foreign languages, learning to learn, ICT or civics. The results from the PISA study (OECD) and the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) survey on civics, which will be published by 2001, will provide answers to some of these problems, but for 'foreign languages' there are no measures in place to address the lack of available data. Furthermore, data on parental participation, and more broadly 'stakeholder participation', clearly needs to be further elaborated than is presently the case, as does data on the evaluation and monitoring of school education. In the latter case, new comparative data should look in particular at the links between external and internal evaluation.
- For some indicators, the age of the data used is clearly a problem. This is particularly so in the field of 'reading', where the data used in this report are almost 10 years old. However, publication of some new data is planned within the coming months and years. This is the situation for six of the seven attainment indicators (mathematics, reading, science, learning to learn, ICT, civics). The availability of regularly updated valid data will continue to be of major concern.

- The problem of the usefulness of the data has been discussed throughout the preparation of this report. One could question whether the data presently available or planned on attainment levels provide sufficient insight into each country's educational specificity. Establishing a strong awareness of the particular nature of a country's educational system would allow countries to take better remedial action in specific areas. Methodologies that are more refined would allow a move away from straightforward comparisons and allow the reader to understand better not only the levels of skills in specific areas but also how these skills are attained in diverse educational systems.
- Having a common approach among European countries that makes the best use of the 'European statistical system' and the 'Community statistical programme'<sup>1</sup> to define the indicator needs and methodologies would allow us to derive greater benefit from using comparative indicators and benchmarks in terms of improving the quality of education.

### **Comparing systems**

Europe is a rich mix of cultures and histories, brought together in one union, facing common problems and pursuing common goals while preserving cultural and linguistic diversity.

European countries share many common objectives. They are all concerned with offering young people the chance to achieve high levels of literacy and numeracy, to provide a stimulating school experience and to instil a desire for learning which will serve them well in their lives beyond school. Such objectives are not contested. Nor is there disagreement about key subjects of the school curriculum. This background provides a strong basis for sharing and learning from one another.

However, subject areas are given different priorities in different Member States. Varying emphases are placed on the context of learning at different ages and stages. Methodologies differ. Teaching and learning is embedded in different structures. Countries diverge in their linguistic and cultural histories. These cultural patterns bring a depth and richness to the dialogue at the European level. They provide a strong basis for Member States to learn from one another.

This is why, in selecting indicators and benchmarks, it is important to choose those which are the most generative in stimulating an open policy dialogue; those which look forward — to policy implications of the data and lines for further inquiry in the future. Data for all countries are embedded in a cultural and historical context. All data are suggestive rather than definitive. Indicators should be regarded as starting points, limited in their internal meaning but unlimited in their implications for improving raising standards for all.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Council Decision No 1999/12/EC of 22 December 1998 on the Community statistical programme 1998 to 2002 (OJ L 42, 16.2.1999, p. 1).