Moving forward with secondary education reform: issues, challenges and proposals

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Core questions

How should secondary education face future cultural, social and economic challenges and opportunities?

What are the incentives to reform in terms of access, retention and achievement?

Are stakeholders willing to re-consider the identity, objectives, contents and scope of secondary education, as well as themselves, within reform processes?

Do stakeholders agree on the need for developing a common conceptual curriculum framework from childhood to tertiary studies, which facilitates diverse, relevant and flexible settings, provisions and competencies for students’ lifelong learning?

How far are policy-makers, supervisors and teachers moving away from the objective-based tradition towards a competency-based approach?
Outline

Secondary Education Today
Key Policy Issues
Strategic Directions
Competency-based Reforms
Secondary Education Today

Role: pivotal status (not just a bridge)
- education as an economic and social policy
- develop the learner i.e. life and citizenship skills
- foster learning to live together

Global Trends:
- divided into lower and upper (non-compulsory) levels
- traditionally separated schools/tracks (i.e. academic/technical) but now the tendency towards more comprehensive, competency-based schooling
- comprehensive, competency-based schooling – entails strengthen the culture of collaboration and working together at the school level (i.e. teachers team work, project work, cooperative learning and tutorial guidance)
Gross enrolment for secondary education uneven and disappointing (i.e. 65% in the Arab states). Advances being made but not sufficient.

Gross enrolment in upper secondary education 20% lower than in lower secondary education (key drop out point)

Inequalities in access and outcomes exist between and within countries, based on gender, income, location, conflict etc.

Quality of achievement in Arab states tends to be below other countries with similar income levels (e.g. TIMSS maths results)

No. of TVET students remains stable but low in Arab states (average 10%). TVET is increasingly encouraged due to high unemployment (up to 60%) and secondary education drop-outs (average of 50%)  

(EFA GMR 2010)
Key Policy Issues

High-quality secondary education undermined by:

Curricula which is **over academic, subject-orientated and irrelevant** (World Bank)

**Strong hierarchical separation** between different levels, schools and tracks, creates **segregation and disruption** (OECD)

TVET especially suffers from **poor government coordination, meagre budget, lack of qualified teachers, irrelevant curricula, lack of standards and insufficient coordination with the private sector** (UNESCO EFA GMR 2010)

**Strong societal perceptions** of secondary education only as a spring-board to tertiary studies and TVET as a « second class » education
Secondary Education Reforms

Reform must visualise **equity and quality** as going hand in hand and secondary education as a **key component of lifelong learning** opportunities.

Global reform increasingly **curriculum-based** (Moreno) – complex feedback relationships between curriculum objectives, structures, contents and assessment around the principles of equity and quality.

**Comprehensive vision** of the curriculum = learning outcomes, pedagogical and didactic strategies, supports, content, assessment and management.

Curricula = «a **dense and flexible contract between politics/society and teachers**» (Braslavsky) – combining political and technical issues involving multiple stakeholders, especially teachers (key consideration for reform to be **truly implemented** and sustainable).
Strategic Directions

**Piecemeal approach** (accommodating specific aspects of the education system, e.g. physical facilities, learning materials, curricula)

**Transformative approach** (holistic perspective)

E.g., a broadened concept of inclusive education which holistically supports secondary education reforms:

- addressing all learners’ needs effectively, by supporting the unified design and implementation of education policies and programmes at different:
  - dimensions (access, processes and learning outcomes)
  - levels (lifelong learning opportunities, settings and provisions)
  - units (national frameworks, school-based curricula, classrooms, and learners)
This implies, amongst other things:

- expanding **basic education** to include the traditional branch of lower secondary education
- providing **diverse, flexible and navigable avenues** between academic disciplines and TVET in higher secondary education
- **smooth transitions** from ECCE to tertiary studies
- other **learning possibilities** and **second chances** within universal public policy frameworks
- **later differentiation** between schools and disciplines
- **inclusive curricula and assessment** (relevant, flexible e.g. competency-based)
- **supporting stakeholders** to participate effectively in curricula development, implementation and evaluation (i.e. teachers, schools, civil society and employers)
Competency-based reforms could strongly support secondary education as a **cross-cutting dimension of curricular design and implementation** in terms of objectives, structure, content, processes, assessment, outcomes etc.

It does **not replace traditional knowledge and disciplines but strengthen learning processes and outcomes**

It **encourages learners to find out and mobilize knowledge among other resources (i.e. values and attitudes) related to their life, citizenship and employment markets.**

Competency-based curricula is suitable for **advancing a common curriculum framework to secondary education and TVET.** This facilitates the **navigability** between the different branches and levels, **breaking up with stratification and social stigmas.**
Competency-based reforms

There is still a strong tradition and practice of subject programmes being *principally designed and structured around a series of generic objectives, a list of content and summative assessment.*

Therefore it is *essential to support stakeholders for incorporating competencies into the curriculum* effectively. It would be risky to set up general competencies without orientating their development in each field of knowledge and/or subject.

“Those working on the development of new curricula are faced with the *challenge of building a new structure with nothing but outdated tools at their disposal*”. (Jonnaert)
Competency-based reforms

Linking competencies and objectives:

General Objectives:
(i) individual and social development; (ii) ethical and civic formation of a responsible citizen; (iii) the role of young people as active actors and (iv) the appreciation of work as a human means of personal and collective development.

Competencies to attain these objectives:
(i) personal (ethics and emotions); (ii) social: (communication, solidarity, democratic participation, creativity); (iii) technical: (organizing and applying scientific and technological knowledge); (iv) methodological: (gathering, processing and critical analysis of information) and (v) cognitive: (self-evaluation, and self-knowledge).
Incorporating competencies into the curricular structure for their development at the subject level:

The curricular structure can be seen as pathways and spaces:

Example of pathways (developing competencies through the different fields of knowledge)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathways</th>
<th>Competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Communication</td>
<td>Communicative and expressive competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences and Mathematics</td>
<td>Scientific-technological competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences and Philosophy</td>
<td>Philosophical and societal competencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Competency-based reform

Example of curricular spaces (developing competencies through disciplinary contents organized by fields of knowledge or subjects).

Table 2: Proposed curricular spaces and competencies in the Higher Secondary Curriculum (grades 10-12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum spaces</th>
<th>Competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space of equivalence</td>
<td>Core competencies: common to all secondary branches and orientations (General, Technical and Vocational).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific space</td>
<td>Specific competencies: related to the fields of knowledge under the different branches and orientations of General, Technical and Vocational Education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional or exploratory space</td>
<td>Vocational competencies: abilities that allow young people to take decisions regarding their project of personal development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decentralized space (school-based curricula)</td>
<td>Extensive competencies: these ones, selected by the school, responding to youth and community interests, complementing the development of other competencies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key challenges:

1. need for a **frank policy discussion** (considering ideological considerations, clarification of concepts, policy options etc.)
2. understanding the **complementarity and enrichment** of competency-based approaches for subject programmes
3. understanding of **real-life learning « situations »** as a strategy and instrument for implementing competency-based approaches
4. clarifying the **relationship between resources (i.e. values, knowledge, skills) and situations** to ensure relevance and fair assessment
5. considering necessary **changes for teachers’ profiles and role** to sustain reform, reflecting an understanding of teachers as **co-developers** of curricula reforms.
Inclusive, Quality Education for All in Higher Secondary Education

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