Piecing Together the Jigsaw of Quality Education for International Experience Sharing and Benchmarking: Wrap Up Remarks

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Distinguished Participants, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to join all conference participants in expressing our deepest and most heartfelt condolences to the people of Thailand over the loss of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

We are truly honored that H.E. General Dapong Ratanasuwan, Minister of Education of the Kingdom of Thailand, attended the Opening Ceremony and shared with us His Majesty the late King’s tremendous support for and contributions to education. His Majesty’s great legacy will continue to inspire people in their pursuit of quality education in the years to come.

Thank you very much, distinguished speakers and participants, for your active engagement and valuable contributions during this three-day conference. Indeed, as our director Mr. Gwang-Jo Kim pointed out in his welcome remarks, the topic of the conference – In Pursuit of Quality Education: The Past, Present, and Future – is very timely and relevant as UNESCO Member States are currently moving ahead with the implementation of the new global education agenda, Education 2030, encapsulated in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), in which concerns over quality are given top priority, along with other cross-cutting issues, such as gender equality, inclusiveness and lifelong learning.

We are particularly grateful to Mr. Kishore Mahbubani, Professor in the Practice of Public Policy and Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy from Singapore, for honoring us with his inspiring and thought provoking Raja Roy Singh Lecture, ‘Can Asia be the Next Higher Education Superpower?’ His message is quite clear. With the changing global economic scenario in favor of Asia, national higher education systems in the region have undergone substantial quantitative expansion in recent decades. The momentum is strong for them to build world-class universities; however, quality concerns must be addressed if the region is to become a higher education superpower commensurate with its rising economic status.

This is one of the few Raja Roy Singh Lectures to address issues related to higher education, which is very indicative of the increasing visibility, if not centrality, of tertiary
education, including TVET and higher education, in the SDG4/Education 2030 agenda.

Concerns about the quality of education have been around for a long time and they will undoubtedly persist. However, key quality factors at the system, policy, school, classroom and teacher levels should be identified by taking stock of Member States’ experiences to provide a big picture perspective for international referencing and benchmarking. In his plenary speech, Professor Manzoor Ahmed from Bangladesh provided a comprehensive overview of how concepts and frameworks of quality education have evolved since 1990, when the Education for All (EFA) era began in Jomtien, Thailand.

It is widely recognized that teachers hold the key to quality education. Indeed, as the saying goes, the quality of education can only be as high as the abilities of those who deliver it. In order for teachers to be able to deliver quality education, it is important that they are empowered, adequately recruited and remunerated, motivated, professionally qualified, and supported within well-resourced, efficient and effectively governed systems.

As we empower teachers, special attention should be given to promoting their operational autonomy in schools and classrooms. Decentralization and capacity building of school leaders and teachers are important to enhance school leadership and teachers’ professional development. The case of the Philippines illustrates many capacity building measures, such as planning workshops, database development, the use of daily lesson logs and learning action cells, as well as the DepED Computerization Programme to support the implementation of K to 12 Basic Education Reform in the country.

To promote quality education, we need to develop and implement solid national curriculum frameworks for school education. Various learning theories and conceptualizations of skills and competencies required of students have been behind the development of learning domains and learning outcomes. We are glad to see that National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) have been developed and implemented in many countries in the region to define learning outcomes for programme development at the tertiary education level, including TVET and higher education.

It is hoped that the research community can continuously provide research support, including basic research and action or policy-oriented research, to nurture, catalyze and inform different levels’ curriculum reforms in countries throughout the region.

School curricula should be holistic and balanced, targeting the whole person development of each student. In this regard, we need to go beyond the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) to equip our students not only with basic life skills, but also with transversal competencies, like global citizenship, that help make them good citizens capable of playing positive roles in an increasingly inter-connected and globalized world.

While we have seen many good examples of how flexible and non-formal education has been provided to students from under-served groups, we should also make sure that all students are exposed to the same balanced education within the national curriculum framework. A dual system of mainstream schools vs. non-formal education might be an expedient solution in the short term, but cannot be perpetuated in the long run. Flexible learning arrangements are based on modalities of delivery, rather than divisions in
learning standards. **Equivalency arrangements** should be put in place for the purpose of the recognition of learning programmes through different modalities, including formal, informal and non-formal education, under a common curriculum standards framework.

At the same time, **individualized** or **customized learning**, and even **home-schooling**, etc, are becoming more and more accepted and legalized as flexible learning arrangements that can contribute to improving the quality of education provision in many countries.

**Class size** is an important quality factor as it can affect student-teacher interactions. Many developed countries have **legal class size limits**. Furthermore, class size has financial implications, and we need to pay more attention to over-sized classrooms and their impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

SDG 4 emphasizes **learning outcomes** as being key to the quality of education. A **holistic approach** to learning outcomes is essential to help avoid the **misinterpretation** and **narrow definition** of learning outcomes. The measurement of learning outcomes is therefore important. **Monitoring** and **assessment** of students’ learning outcomes can make sure that students are learning as expected against national curriculum requirements. The **Republic of Korea** has been conducting its annual **National Assessment of Educational Achievements** (NAEA) for secondary school students since 2000 as part of the country’s school accountability system. A number of countries and systems have also participated in large-scale international student assessment exercises, like **PISA** and **TIMSS** for **international comparison**, and as tools for informing policies and practices.

While acknowledging the positive impact of these international assessment exercises in terms of **increasing political awareness** about the quality of education in general and the importance of student learning outcomes in particular, we should avoid defining students’ performance merely by their **examination** and **testing scores**.

**School-based assessments** conducted by teachers should eventually become the routine for student assessments, be they **formative** or **summative**, so that assessments can really serve their purpose. It is even possible to measure non-cognitive and transversal skills, as we have seen from the presentations made by colleagues from **Australia**, **India**, **Cambodia** and **Viet Nam**. However, we should also keep in mind that quality is not all about the numbers.

Moreover, as the saying goes, **not everything that counts can be counted; not everything that can be counted counts**. Perhaps we should not be over-mathematical when it comes to student evaluation and assessment, as **Mr Mahbubani** warned us. Assessment based on **teachers’ daily observations** and the development of **students’ portfolios** can balance the mathematical bias with more analytical descriptions and illustrations.

At the same time, proper attention should be given to the **processes** and **learning environment** that lead to the achievement of learning outcomes, including **pedagogies** used in the teaching and learning process. Appropriate pedagogies can enhance the **effectiveness of teaching and learning** during school hours and free students from the pressure of needing **extra private lessons**.
The “happy schools” championed by UNESCO Bangkok require not only a safe and pleasant physical school environment, but also students’ mental well-being and a classroom environment supported by appropriate pedagogies. Teachers who are well trained professionally to adopt learner-centered, development-appropriate pedagogies inside the classrooms play a critical role in nurturing happy students. It is also important to engage parents and communities in the management of schools, as proposed by SDG4.

School improvement has been another key focus of research related to quality education in developed countries. A traditional way to enhance the quality of education is to establish a solid school inspection system under which schools are required to prepare a self-evaluation report to be examined by inspection teams through on-site school visits. Weak schools identified by the inspection exercises receive recommendations for improvement from the inspectors and should implement action plans accordingly.

STEM education is very much related to the relevance of education to the needs of individuals and the society as a whole. STEM education, together with education in the social sciences and humanities, can provide two different and complementary types of academic training and therefore contribute to the holistic development of individuals. Strong STEM education can lay the foundation in a country for higher quality engineering education, which is essential to upgrade economies to focus on high-end manufacturing industries in order to escape the so-called middle-income trap.

The concept of inclusive education used to be closely related to special education for physically and mentally challenged students. However, the scope of inclusive education has been evolving to cover all kinds of disadvantaged students, including, but not limited to, those who are socially, economically, ethnically as well as academically disadvantaged. Teachers should pay attention to all students in the classroom, not just selected groups, to leave no one behind. An inclusive classroom is important for quality education for all, especially when teachers face over-sized classroom situations in many places.

What has been missing in many of the discussions about quality is the topic of policies on homework, which has affected the morale and workloads of both teachers and students in countries in this region. While regular homework can help to raise a student’s performance, the excessive homework given in many countries might stifle a student’s curiosity, which is the key to sustainable learning and quality education.

And last, but not least, the role of ICTs in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning has been increasingly acknowledged in countries throughout region. This requires the triple integration of technology, pedagogy and content in the delivery of study programmes. Teachers should not only be subject experts, but also have the pedagogical expertise and ICT skills needed to deliver study programmes effectively. The promotion of open educational resources (OER), together with massive open on-line courses (MOOCs) and blended learning can facilitate the free distribution of quality learning materials and bring quality education to more students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

That’s all from me at the moment and sorry if I missed any important points presented at this conference. You have my heartfelt thanks and congratulations. Thank you very much for your attention!