Background Paper

Beyond 2015 – Rethinking Learning in a Changing World

I. Background

The world is in the midst of profound transformations. Changes in the economy, demographics, technology and socio-cultural development create new requirements for education and learning. Rapid multiplication and diversification in sources of information, the acceleration in the production of and circulation of knowledge, the reduction of development cycles in all spheres of economy, combined with the development of new information and communication technologies and digital media, are spurring the emergence of new forms of learning. Societies are increasingly interconnected and interdependent in the wake of intensified economic globalisation. However, growing youth unemployment 1 coupled with rising vulnerable employment (ILO, 2012)2 and increasing inequalities are exacerbating social exclusion and undermining social cohesion.

While a focus on learning is not new in the world of education3, this renewed interest is taking on a new shape, driven by two main trends. Firstly, the traditional focus on the provision of education and training, often spurred by international development agendas, has tended to emphasize schooling at the expense of effective and relevant learning. A recent report by the Brookings Institution (2011, p.3) states that there is a ‘global learning crisis’ affecting children and youth both within and outside schools. This has led to an emerging awareness to move beyond a sole emphasis on access, enrolment and completion to include a greater interest in quality of learning, learning processes, and learning outcomes. Secondly, there is growing recognition that the ways in which young people acquire knowledge are changing. Educational institutions no longer have the monopoly of “transmitting” knowledge: indeed, there is increasing recognition of the need to build lifelong and life-wide learning systems. Our approaches to education must adapt to these emerging realities, challenges and opportunities.

Global discussions around learning

At the international level, there is a growing momentum around learning, and consensus on its importance is widespread (Burnett, 2012). Improving the quality of learning is one of the three

1 With almost 75 million young people under the age of 25 years of age out of the total of 200 million unemployed persons, global unemployment is clearly mainly affecting youth (ILO 2012).
2 According to latest ILO (2012) figures, vulnerable employment is on the rise mainly in sub-Saharan Africa (22 million persons) and in South Asia (12 million persons).
3 See, for example, UNESCO’s landmark publications; Learning to Be: Education for the world of today and tomorrow (1972), and Learning: The treasure within (1996).
priorities in the UN Secretary General’s Initiative ‘Education First’ (UN, 2012). The Initiative significantly raises the profile of education within the international development agenda and points to the importance of the centrality of learning. Learning has become one of the core themes in international discussions with regard to: a) the role of education in post-2015 MDGs and b) UNESCO’s on-going efforts to stimulate reflections on education for the future and of the post-2015 education agenda (UNESCO, 2012). A recent high-level expert meeting, “Towards EFA 2015 and Beyond – Shaping a New Vision for Education” (UNESCO Bangkok, May 2012) also highlighted the fact that learning should be one of the areas of emphasis in shaping future education goals and strategies.

The greater recognition of the importance of learning is expressed in the report of Brookings Institution (2011) on presenting a rationale for redoubling efforts in education and establishing principles needed to fulfil the Global Compact on Learning. It is also expressed in the related work of the Learning Metrics Taskforce convened by UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics (UIS) and Brookings Institution on measuring learning outcomes. The objective of its work is to catalyze a shift in the global conversation on education from a focus on access to access plus learning (UIS and Brookings Institution, 2012).

This paper outlines some of the key considerations on learning, emerging changes and their implications for education and learning for the future.

II. Selected key considerations on learning

As we embark on a discussion on learning for the future, it must be recognized that there are multifaceted approaches to learning, from different disciplines and different schools of thought. While it is impossible to present a comprehensive summary of current knowledge and thinking on learning, some selected key considerations are provided which could serve as a basis for further discussion and reflections on reshaping education.

The four pillars of learning

The landmark publication of the Report of the Delors Commission for the 21st Century (UNESCO, 1996) proposed a humanistic and integrated vision of education, based on the four pillars of learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. The report was based on a vision of education as a public good with a fundamental role to play in personal and social development. The Delors report took the concept of lifelong learning as the key organizing principle for education and training systems, and what it offers in terms of ‘flexibility, diversity and availability at different times and in different places’ (UNESCO, 1996, p. 19).
Learning and economic development

In justifying investments in education, many governments have turned to the work of experts in the economics of education, many of whom refer to the human capital theory in their work. It is now commonly accepted that allocating resources in education has positive impact at many levels, from individual lives to society and the economy. Recent rate of return studies which included both educational attainment and skill measures (OECD, 2005, 2007a) showed that the main reason well educated and trained individuals earn higher incomes is because they have higher knowledge and skill levels (Maclean and Wilson, 2009).

Previously, enrolment rates were the focus for perceived links to economic development. But increasingly, attention has shifted to the quality of learning and the relevant skills required for a dynamic workplace in a changing world. Empirical studies provide robust support that quality education contributes to economic growth (Hanushek and Kimko, 2000; Hanushek and Wößmann, 2010). School attainment alone does not lead to improved economic conditions. ‘Increasing the average number of years of schooling attained by the labor force boosts the economy only when increased levels of school attainment also boosts cognitive skills.’ (Hanushek et al., 2008, p. 64). While more difficult to define and measure compared to cognitive skills, there is also a series of studies showing that non-cognitive skills such as leadership, communication, critical thinking, self-esteem, values and persistent are equally or even more important in determining individual earnings (e.g., Heckman, Stixrud and Urzua, 2006).

The understanding that learning, rather than schooling, has a direct impact on growth and development is increasingly recognized by governments and development partners. For instance, the World Bank’s new strategy paper, Learning for All, (World Bank, 2011, p. 1) states that ‘the driver of development will ultimately be what individuals learn, both in and out of school, from preschool through the labor market.’ It further points out that ‘Growth, development, and poverty reduction depend on the knowledge and skills that people acquire, not the number of years that they sit in a classroom’ (World Bank, 2011, p. 3).

While knowledge and cognitive skills are undoubtedly determining factors of individual income and the level of economic development, at the same time economists recognize that these cognitive skills can only explain a relatively small percentage of variations in income between individuals and nations. In response, recent studies started to shed light on the positive effect of non-cognitive skills and competencies (e.g., enthusiasm, motivation, and resilience) on individual earnings and productivity. Ensuring acquisition of such cognitive and non-cognitive skills through effective learning among people is therefore crucial for economic development.
How do people learn?

Understanding how individuals learn and creating contexts to facilitate learning are key educational challenges in the 21st century. While learning has long been a central topic in psychology and education, today researchers in learning sciences are examining learning processes with new tools and insights. In all learning-oriented disciplines there is a diverse array of approaches and schools of thought. In the past, learning theories emphasized constructs like perception, memory and thinking as central to learning processes.

More recently, learning is portrayed as a socially embedded process, in which interactions between people in communities of practice enable learning to occur (Wenger, 2009). Learning emerges in and through diverse social and contextual activities. For some scholars, such as Illeris, (2003) these learning processes are not distinct but occur simultaneously. He proposes a holistic model for effective learning, in which cognitive, social and emotional components become the three complementary dimensions of learning.

In the theory of multiple intelligences, Gardner (1991, p.7) argues, based on considerable evidence, that ‘students possess different kinds of minds and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways.’ This conception challenges schools and educational systems that design learning activities based on the notion that every child can learn the same material in the same way and that uniform, standardized assessments provide valid measurements of actual student learning (Gardner, 1991).

With the explosive spread of digital technologies, some studies suggest that the current generation of learners ‘think and process information fundamentally differently...’ (Prensky, 2001, p.1). While this may pose a challenge to traditional education systems, it opens up possibilities for new pedagogical approaches and learning activities.

The importance of investing in early childhood, and nurturing learning at an early age, is widely acknowledged. The foundations for effective lifelong learning and future knowledge acquisition are established in these early years. In addition to acquiring basic skills such as literacy and numeracy and familiarity with ICTs, young learners need to develop active learning practices and build the confidence to explore and master entirely new skills (CISCO, 2010). The Delors Report (UNESCO, 1996) not only underscored the need for learners to receive a sound basic education, but the challenge for ‘schools to impart the desire for, and pleasure in, learning, by developing students’ intellectual curiosity and their ability to learn how to learn’ (UNESCO, 1996, p. 21).
The growing focus on the process of learning in the education community—that is, understanding how, when and where learning occurs—has sparked interest in educational neuroscience, or neuroeducation. Recent insights reveal a wealth of information about the neuronal circuitries involved in the “how” aspect of learning as well as factors which may affect it. Neuroscience also addresses the “when” or time dimension of learning. The overall message is nuanced: studies suggest that “there are no ‘critical periods’ when learning must take place but [that] there are ‘sensitive periods’ when the individual is particularly primed to engage in specific learning activities” (OCED, 2007b, p. 18).

Drawing on insights from brain research, Spitzer (2006) argues that the conditions for successful learning and differences in learning occur at different stages of life. This premise could inform the design of learning environments and pedagogical approaches. Spitzer, for example, proposes mixed communities of elderly and young people to maximize the probability of finding innovative solutions to a problem given their distinct learning capacities and experiences.

The perhaps greatest contribution of neuroscience to learning from a temporal point of view is its affirmation of the brain’s lifelong plasticity, that is, its capacity to change in response to environmental demands throughout life (Howard-Jones 2008; OECD, 2007b). This fundamental premise could help inform the design of learning environments and pedagogical approaches and could also support efforts toward a lifelong learning approach to education. The insights regarding the brain’s potential for lifelong learning also has key implications, as it suggests that provisions must be made for providing opportunities for learning for all, regardless of age. This is very much in keeping with UNESCO’s position on the centrality of lifelong learning.

As The Royal Society (2011, p.v) argues, “the emerging field of educational neuroscience presents opportunities as well as challenges for education. It provides means to develop a common language and bridge the gulf between educators, psychologists and neuroscientists.” The implications for learning for the future are many, suggesting the need for a reciprocal relationship and dialogue between education policymakers and practitioners and those who conduct research on learning sciences, similar to the relationship between medicine and biology.

At the same time, while the potential of applying insights from neuroscience research to educational practice may be significant, certain argue that this may be premature given the weak accumulation of studies, especially based in different cultures, e.g., in Asia-Pacific contexts (Fischer, 2010). This points to the need for further and intensified research in this area. Fischer proposed that the focus should be on integrating research with practice so as to
illuminate the brain and genetic bases for learning, while concurrently examining how social practices and cultural orientations influence learning and teaching.

III. Emerging changes and their implications for education and learning

What should be learnt and for what purposes?

Beyond the cognitive dimensions of learning, often expressed in terms of high performance in assessment, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of other types of skills and competencies required to better prepare the young generation to live and work in the future. Based on the question of what skills and competencies are relevant for students to live a successful and responsible life, the work done by the DeSeCo Project under the auspices of the OECD is noteworthy, which aimed at defining and selecting key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society (OECD, 2005; Rychen and Salganik, 2001, 2003). Further work in this domain was undertaken by the European Commission (EU, 2007) in developing the European Reference Framework for Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning⁴ as well as on 21st century skills by organisations such as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21, 2011) and IT companies advancing the Assessment and Teaching of 21st-Century Skills project (ATC21S, 2010) to advocate for the empowering of students with skills including collaboration, communication, ICT literacy, and social and cultural competencies (Voogt and Roblin, 2010).

The impact of non-cognitive skills and competencies on cognitive skills, school attainment, earnings and employment has been illustrated by Brunello and Schlotter (2011). Burnett and Felsman (2012, p.11) argues that ‘there seems to be an emerging consensus that certain non-cognitive “life skills” are essential for employment and that these need to be acquired largely in school or through specific youth training schemes. These skills have been variously defined and are often referred to as “21st Century Skills”.’ Of the many non-cognitive skills considered to be important for the future, creativity has garnered much attention as a prerequisite to facing the challenges of a complex world (Robinson, 2011). Creativity, when fostered in the education system, can be harnessed as an economic driver in various environments, especially in globally competitive enterprises (McWilliam and Haukka, 2008).

A related consideration concerns the importance of teaching people to live together. This conception of education acknowledges its centrality in promoting peace, citizenship and sustainable development and responding to crucial challenges such as ethnic and religious conflicts, youth unemployment, social unrest and HIV and AIDS. While this aspect of education

has been largely neglected in both international discourse and national policy, there are a number of initiatives to define and measure this domain, including the OECD’s projects on the Social Outcomes of Learning (SQL) and Education and Social Progress as well as the University of London Institute for Education’s Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning. In a similar vein, the report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009) recommended that measurement systems should shift attention from metrics of economic production to a system based on the well-being of individuals. UNESCO Bangkok is also increasingly working in the area of ‘Learning to Live Together’.

Societies of tomorrow will continue to shift and economies will evolve rapidly – today’s skills and knowledge may not be relevant tomorrow. Therefore, there is a need for more flexible and adaptable skills capable of addressing new and unforeseen changes in the labour market, as a result of scientific research, technological innovations and their application to the world of production (UNESCO, 1996). Increasing emphasis on transferable skills in vocational education is a reflection of such changes. Education systems should train learners to be innovative, able to adapt to and assimilate change and be able to continue learning. In addition young people require specific sets of skills to be competent in the connected and constantly changing world, which includes critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, communication and technology literacy (Voogt and Roblin, 2010).

In preparing education for the future, it is important to continue exploring how education systems should promote learning for the acquisition of relevant skills and competencies needed to confront contemporary challenges and to be responsible and engaged members of society in a life-long learning perspective.

How are the rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies and the growing volume of information impacting learning?

With the continued development of knowledge societies, the influence of new technologies on the creation of knowledge is growing. Not only is the rate of production continuing to grow exponentially, but information is also less and less dependent on text-based transmission and increasingly includes audio and visual support through a variety of media. The unprecedented growth in the volume of information and its changing nature are questioning the authority of traditional bodies of knowledge controlled by established educational institutions and an elite corps of specialists.
At the same time, the rapid advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has changed the way people learn and new technologies have radically changed the learning landscape which opens up new avenues for pedagogical approaches and learning without the limits of time and space and beyond traditional channels in formal and non-formal settings. A true paradigm shift for learning has occurred with the emergence of Web 2.0 and cloud computing, which allowed anyone to be a knowledge creator. In this new era of digital technologies, ICTs have been transforming the role of learners from passive recipients of knowledge in the century-old traditional school model into the main actors of their own knowledge construction. This transformative role of ICTs has yet to be fully investigated and made use of in our education systems.

**A shift from teaching to an increased focus on learning**

Education systems have traditionally focused on the transfer of information and knowledge from the teacher to the learner. Such a teacher-dependent education system is also “time-dependent, location-dependent, and situation-dependent” (Frey, 2010). With the multiplication of new information and communication technologies and digital media, sources of information and knowledge are becoming more diversified and accessible beyond the confines of formal and non-formal education systems. In schools, the repertoire of pedagogies employed should include student-centric strategies such as project-based learning and collaborative learning. Beyond the traditional curriculum-related questions of what to teach (learning content) and how to teach it (teaching/learning methods, pedagogical approaches), the question of when and where learning is taking place is increasingly becoming important. Recognizing that learning is increasingly happening informally beyond the walls of educational institutions, at different times and locations, the role of teachers will also have to evolve from dispensers of information and knowledge to facilitators and enablers of learning.

**Towards a focus on the assessment of basic competencies**

There has been a shifting focus in the global education development discourse from access and participation in education towards the results of educational processes. This reflects a growing international awareness that expanding access to educational opportunities must necessarily take into account the effectiveness and relevance of learning acquired. The current work of the Learning Metrics Task Force co-chaired by the Centre for Universal Education/Brookings Institution and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) is an important illustration of this focus. The Task Force is currently identifying learning outcomes and measures at the pre-primary, primary and post-primary levels in domains of competencies which go beyond traditional areas of academic learning. Indeed, the selection of competencies around the domains of ‘physical
well-being’, ‘social and emotional’, ‘culture and the arts’, ‘literacy and communication’, ‘learning approaches and cognition’, ‘numeracy and mathematics’ and ‘science and technology’ is both a welcome and ambitious development (UIS and Brookings Institution, 2012)

**Beyond the classroom-centred paradigm of learning**

Learning in education systems is currently still focused on the schooling model. This schooling model surprisingly continues to associate learning essentially with classroom teaching, when a great deal of learning actually takes place at home and elsewhere in the form of homework, reading, writing of papers, and preparation of examinations. Formal schools and higher education institutions have been the predominant carrier of knowledge, transmitted from the teacher to the student. The physical space defined by the classroom - or what Frey (2010) refers to as ‘classroom-centric learning’ - remains a central feature of formal education systems at all levels of learning. This classroom-centred paradigm is being increasingly eroded with the current expansion of access to information and learning spaces. Indeed, newer understandings of learning have gone beyond the classrooms and schools-centred learning paradigm and moved from learning as a space to learning as an activity. Learning outside schools matters for learning inside school. New modes of learning need to be developed, both formal and informal to meet the demands of knowledge-based societies (CISCO, 2010). The challenge is how to bring these together to formulate a system that supports ubiquitous learning. Thus, there is a move towards developing an open, holistic learning system that is centered on society and built upon the concept of life-wide learning, which is a central theme for UNESCO’s work. The creation of such a system will require important reorientations of current education systems.

**Flexible lifelong learning systems**

The considerations above are perfectly in line with the lifelong learning framework. “Encompassing formal, non-formal and informal learning, lifelong learning emphasises the integration of learning and living – in life-wide contexts across family and community settings, in study, work and leisure, and throughout an individual’s life” (UIL, 2012, p.3). While the paradigm itself is not new, recent societal developments are reinvigorating the relevance of life-long education. In addition to the continuously quickening pace of technological and scientific development, the exponential growth and changing nature of information, the lifelong learning framework is critically important in the context of the increasingly challenging task of forecasting the emergence of new professions and associated higher levels of skills needs. There is a need to develop more responsive education and skills policies that include greater

---

5 This was already articulated, for instance, as early as 1972 in Learning to Be (UNESCO).
diversification and flexibility and that allow for the adaptation of skill supply to rapidly changing needs and ensure that individuals are better equipped to be more resilient and can learn to develop and apply career adaptive competencies most effectively (UNESCO, 2012).

Operationalizing the concept of life-long learning would require a sector-wide education reform as well as the creation of learning opportunities in all settings or modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) for people of all ages (infants, children, adolescents and adults). Taking this a step further leads us towards the concept of broader learning systems and ultimately a learning society. The process of moving from an education system to a learning society (CISCO, 2010) demands the creation of a lifelong learning infrastructure which cultivates and embraces new learning providers, from the public, business and NGO sectors, a strong coalition of government and other learning providers. In such a setting, employers will play an important role in creating employment practices and opportunities that support a culture of learning.

Not only do we have to reflect on how to bring such broader learning systems to fruition but also ways in which education systems, which are at the core of such broader systems, should be transformed. Education systems for the future need to place more emphasis on equipping learners with the necessary skills to be competent in an increasingly connected and constantly changing world so that they are able to be innovative and be adaptive to changing social and economic requirements. Learning is thus not only about knowledge acquisition, but about learning to learn and to continue learning throughout the course of one’s life. Consequently, learning should be addressed across the life-cycle and future approaches to education need to be underpinned by a life-long - and a life-wide - learning approach.

Towards the recognition, assessment and validation of skills acquisition

The growing recognition of the importance of learning and relearning taking place outside the formal education and training systems raises the issue of the recognition, assessment and validation of learning acquired through self-learning, peer-learning, work-based learning (including internships and apprenticeships), on-the-job training, or through other experiences of learning and skills development beyond formal education and training. From a traditional focus on the content of learning programmes and teaching/learning methods, the focus is now shifting to the recognition, assessment and validation of knowledge and skills, regardless of the formal, non-formal and informal pathways through which they were acquired. In terms of skills development, “there is [also] evidence of increasing attention paid to the measurement of skills levels and the efficient matching of these skills with those required by the world of work. This is being done either through the development of outcome-based national/vocational
qualifications frameworks or through large-scale assessments of skills levels among adults”\textsuperscript{6} (UNESCO, 2012). It is therefore important to envisage new approaches to education and skills development that capitalize on the full potential of all learning settings.

**Implications for education policy making**

What we need to ask at this point is how can these new understandings of learning be translated into educational policy and its implementation? Too often, an abundance of research and knowledge has not been applied to policy and practice. In this view, it is key that we identify ways in which these different insights can be translated into policies and practice at the country level. It will also be important to get a better understanding how existing and future research could be applied and what future research would be required.

While the development status of a given country will determine its educational requirements – and as such, education and learning will be contextualized – education systems for the future will need to provide learners with a set of skills to be competent in an increasingly connected and constantly changing world so that they are able to be innovative and adaptive to changing social and economic requirements. This reinforces the concept that learning is not only about knowledge acquisition, but about learning to learn and to continue learning, throughout the course of one’s life.

In view of the above considerations, traditional education systems need to be transformed and reimagined as broader learning systems. Systems should consider alternative means of delivery and provision, which improve and expand learner skills and competences in an increasingly connected and ever-changing social and economic world.

**IV. Implications for the Asia-Pacific Region**

The Asia-Pacific is far from a homogenous entity: it is a complex and exceptionally diverse region. It is home to over four billion people, constituting 61 per cent of the world’s population (UNESCAP, 2011). Yet this population is far from evenly distributed. The region contains a number of the world’s most populous countries – Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan, which together account for almost half of the world’s population – as well as its smallest island states. The diversity of the region is also shown in the number of languages spoken: there are in fact, over 3,500 languages in the Asia Pacific with over 600 in Indonesia, one hundred in the Philippines and more than 800 in Papua New Guinea (UNESCO, 2004). This

\textsuperscript{6} See, for example, the inventory of the European Training Foundation (ETF, 2010); CEDEFOP (2011); ILO (2010); PIACC etc.
diversity is a major factor to be taken into consideration when discussing the future of education in the regional context of the Asia-Pacific.

In 2010, fertility rates in the region were equivalent to the “replacement rate” of 2.1 In other words, Asia and the Pacific is a rapidly aging region. This situation, in combination with a large young population (youth bulges) in many countries of the region has important implications for education systems for the future.

Over the past decade, the Asia-Pacific region has shown rapid economic growth and overall development. Together with the emergence of a growing number of middle-income countries and wider social development achievements, the region has become a considerable economic and political force. However, despite these positive macro trends, there are vast disparities between and within countries in living standards and social and economic opportunities. While Asia and the Pacific have maintained the lowest unemployment rate of any region at 5.0% in 2009, it is still vulnerable to global economic uncertainty and is plagued by widening economic disparities, both among and within countries. An Australian person, for example, is on average 45 times financially better off than a person in Timor-Leste, one of its closest neighbours. In Thailand, Bangkok’s Gross Provincial Product was roughly 20 times higher than the remote North Eastern province of Amnat Charoen (UNESS, 2011, p.12).

Other key emerging trends in the region which have major implications for education for the future include the rapid advancements in information technologies and interconnectivity. In 2009, the number of internet users was more than 5 times higher than in 2000 (UNESCAP, 2011). We have witnessed the emergence of Singapore as a “wired island”, with 83% of the population broadband internet subscribers. But this contrasts starkly with Myanmar, with the third-lowest digital opportunity in the world at 0.04%.

The great diversity of the region also applies to its education systems. While education is central to many Asia-Pacific countries’ development approaches and noticeable achievements have been made, significant challenges and disparities between and within countries remain. Some countries have education systems that produce high academic achievements. In others, access, quality and completion remain a major concern. Peoples from war-torn zones, remote communities, ethnic minorities and women still face difficulties accessing education. There has been considerable progress in youth and adult literacy, but is still inadequate to meet needs in Asian and Pacific countries, and the region contains the largest number of illiterate adults of any region in the world. Countries have now also become concerned with improving the quality of education, increasing access to post-basic education and to skills development, as well as improving the learning environment.
These development trends and diverse circumstances and needs raise questions about the approach to education and learning in the region. As education challenges and types of learning requirements vary, the understanding of the purposes of learning and skills requirements differ from country to country. For example higher education and research will become more important for economically advanced countries as innovation will be the main source of growth (CISCO, 2010). This diversity calls for diverse solutions to diverse challenges and provides a wide spectrum in terms of perspectives for rethinking learning in the context of the region.

Education for the future in the Asia-Pacific also requires revisiting the purpose of education from a social and cultural perspective, and not simply an economic one. A model of human development for the region would necessarily incorporate a wide range of considerations such as quality of life and respect for diversity. It would be characterized by increased attention to social participation, equity and cultural diversity including the use of local languages, the inclusion of traditional knowledge and value systems, ethics and transparency in education policy and planning.

In a discussion of learning in the Asia-Pacific region, one may also take into consideration the influences of philosophies such as Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism which play an important role in the cultural identity of part of the region. As these philosophies offer a certain perspective of an approach to life, it is interesting to get a better understanding how they may have contributed to the educational outlook and performances of various countries.

For example, the Taoist concept of ‘carefreeness’ (逍遥游) means that personal achievements or competition are not emphasised as a major value. Similar to Taoism, Buddhism does not prize knowledge with its promise of material benefits, and it has influences and a legacy in East Asia, India and Southeast Asia. At the same time, certain countries/territories within the region with this cultural heritage which includes a concept of achievements that extends beyond academic performances, like the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong have a strong belief in competitiveness and high-stake testing in education. This combination of seemingly contrasting beliefs may offer a potential area for future research and a consideration when implementing the new insights in learning that are currently mostly Eurocentric in nature, taking into account the local contexts and cultures.

Because of its diversity and strive for rapid growth, Asia-Pacific countries possess tremendous potential to become a hotspot for innovations in education, to develop new visions of learning and construct an ideal learning system that can be used to invigorate and inspire current mainstream systems that are tied down by traditional educational baggage. In working towards the creation of a learning system with a lifelong perspective, by building up its ICT capacity,
having dialogues with local communities and continuing with EFA efforts, the Asia-Pacific region will be a very dynamic region to take note of in time to come.

V. Implications for the post-2015 development and education agendas

In general, it can be said that there is consensus at the international level that the current emphasis on enrolment and completion in the international education agenda must be broadened to also include a focus on learning. The Brookings Institution-led “Global Compact on Learning” (Brookings Institution, 2011, p.5) strongly argues that ‘Learning for all’ should be the new goal driving the global education agenda. These considerations are echoed by a growing agreement among many governmental and non-governmental stakeholders that quality education and learning should be among the core constructs around which new policy priorities are designed in the post-2015 era (Benavot, 2011).

While there is consensus on learning becoming a central topic in the post-2015 agendas as well as for education in the future as such, further discussions and reflections are necessary as to how this can be best achieved. This is closely linked to the discussion of whether a learning goal should be included in the post-2015 agendas. Burnett (2012, p.2) points out that, ‘while almost all members of the global education community agree that learning should receive more attention, there is no consensus that this is best achieved through an international learning goal.’ He proposes that countries should be able to set their own specific learning goals within a general MDG framework.

These considerations point to the need for further discussions and increased consultations at the country level for the relevance of introducing a possible goal on learning into future education and development agendas. Such a goal, while universally valid, would need to be relevant to country needs and adopt a flexible approach towards countries setting their own learning goals. An interesting possibility to be further explored could be the idea of region-specific learning goals and indicators like in the European Union and Latin America. As 2015 approaches, it is imperative that these questions now be raised and considered carefully by each region and each country.

VI. Conclusions

In light of the above considerations, it is clear that rethinking learning cannot be discussed from one perspective alone. It requires insights from multiple disciplines and schools of thought and needs to draw upon the multitude of discussions and knowledge on this topic. While learning has clearly been acknowledged as a key theme for education for the future at both the national and international level, it remains unclear how it will be featured within the international post
2015 development and education agendas. A second challenge is its operationalization at country level, which requires a definition of a realistic set of skills and competencies and their measurement. Based on the outcomes of the meeting ‘Beyond 2015 – Rethinking learning in a Changing World’ and other work in this area, UNESCO will continue its activities towards education for the future in the post 2015 era and chart the contours of a forward-looking vision of learning.

VII. References


OECD. 2005. *Definition and Selection of Key Competencies – Executive Summary*. DeSeCo Project, OECD.  


