Introduction to Panel 5:

*Rethinking Learning in the Asia Pacific Region*

**Background**

The Asia-Pacific is far from a homogenous entity; it is a complex and exceptionally diverse region in terms of geography, population and size of countries, in terms of its history and culture including languages and socio-economic development.

Over the past decade, the Asia-Pacific region has shown dynamic economic growth, technological advancement and socio-cultural changes. Together with the emergence of a growing number of middle and higher-income countries, the region has become a considerable economic and political force. The prospect of increasing regional integration, including ASEAN economic community in 2015, could generate further developments and motivate countries to spur their economic performance and innovations. However, despite these positive general trends, there are vast disparities between and within countries in income, living standards and social and economic opportunities; economic growth has not led to equal opportunities for quality of life for all the people of this region.

While education is central to many Asia-Pacific countries’ development agendas and despite noticeable achievements made so far, significant challenges remain, especially disparities between and within countries as concerns access to schooling, quality of education and learning achievements (UNESCO, 2012). As measured in terms of the results of international learning tests, some countries are among the best performers, while others show very low results. In many countries, access and completion remain a major basic concern. Peoples from war-torn zones, remote communities, ethnic minorities and women are particularly disadvantaged. Youth and adult literacy has made considerable progress, but is still inadequate to meet needs in Asia-Pacific countries. Indeed, the Asia-Pacific contains the largest number of illiterate adults of any region in the world. Concomitantly, most countries have now also become increasingly concerned with improving the quality of education, increasing access to post-basic education and to skills development.

These circumstances raise questions about the approach to education and learning in the region. As educational challenges vary, understanding of the purpose and types of learning and skills requirements differ from country to country. For economically advanced countries, for example, higher education and research will become more important as innovation will be the main source of growth (CISCO, 2010). Other countries are striving to reach a similar
level of development, thus investing more prominently in secondary education, while the low performing countries continue to struggle to provide the very basic education to all, including to a large number of out-of-school children and youth and adults. This diversity calls for diverse solutions to diverse challenges and provides a wide spectrum of perspectives for rethinking education and learning in the context of the region. However, exchange of innovative approaches to education is beneficial for mutual learning not only among countries facing similar challenges, but also across countries at various level of development.

Education in the Asia-Pacific also needs to be revisited in terms of the purpose of education and learning, not simply from an economic perspective. A model of human development for the region will necessarily incorporate a wide range of considerations, including social and cultural, such as character education, quality of life and respect for diversity. It will involve increased attention to social participation, equitable development 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.

Rethinking learning and reorienting education is needed to respond to the new skills and competencies required in light of rapidly changing and increasingly globalized economies, technological advances and increased labour mobility and migration in the region. Education systems in the Asia-Pacific will need to train learners to be more innovative, able to adapt to and assimilate change and motivated to continue learning. Young people will be required to be competent in a connected and constantly changing world, including critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, communication and technology literacy.

In view of the need for education systems in the region to focus their attention on quality of learning (e.g. the effectiveness of the learning process and the relevance of what is being learnt), policy makers should harness the new insights from research on learning from neuroscience and learning sciences, as well as analysis of economic returns. This must be reflected in education policy and translated into adequate pedagogical approaches. The increased focus on learning in the Asia-Pacific region will go hand in hand with furthering the work of comprehensively measuring learning outcomes, i.e. cognitive, non-cognitive and technical skills.

Furthermore, recent developments such as increased interconnectivity have radically impacted the ways in which students access information and learn in the region. The fact that learning is no longer confined to the classroom and creates new possibilities in terms of where and how learning could take place presents new opportunities for education systems to explore. As such, there is need for policy makers in the region to reflect on the opportunities provided by new technologies to transform education systems. In such a transformed and widened learning system, a strong coalition of government and other learning providers would need to be built.

In sum, the panel will discuss the specific learning requirements of the Asia-Pacific region based on its specificities and requirements. It will discuss in which way the most recent findings from research in learning sciences and ICTs can be put to use for the development of innovative and more relevant learning methodologies, backed by relevant education
policies. It will also discuss how new insights can help to better reach and ensure learning of excluded populations as well as assessment of learning outcome to ensure quality and relevance.

Proposed topics for discussion

• What learning outcomes are increasingly required for the future, in particular in countries of the region?
• Application of recent insights on learning to the building of life-long and life-wide learning systems in the region
• What are the implications for education policies and innovations in countries of the region?
• How can new research evidence help to better reach and ensure learning of excluded populations?
• How to ensure better linkages between curriculum, teaching and assessment of learning outcome to ensure relevance, quality and effectiveness of learning, also taking into consideration the great diversity in the region and different learning needs?

References


