Guiding Notes for the Panel Discussion Four:

*Trends in the Education Policy Environment in the Asia and Pacific Region and Implications for Education*

**Introduction**

In an environment in which the world is becoming smaller or “flatter” (Friedman 2005), many have argued that the sheer force of globalization has placed governments in increasingly similar and constrained policy environments, including in education. In this view, while globalization has certainly produced a range of social and economic benefits, the increased transnational flow of information, capital, goods and people has undermined the sovereignty of the nation state. Governments are now exposed to an ever more challenging new policy environment; one characterized by, amongst other things: increased global competition; widening income and wealth gaps between and within countries; and enhanced financial volatility. In this view, openness has simultaneously made countries increasingly vulnerable to external “shocks” and increased the costs of disengagement.

Under such circumstances, there is little contestation that the nature of education policy-making has changed, and these changes are likely to intensify. Education policies are now made in an environment in which there is: (1) a push for quantifiable results; (2) an increasing role of non-state actors; (3) stronger emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness; (4) greater prominence given to questions of accountability and transparency of government; and (5) a more intense pressure on public financing. These trends can be observed across the Asia-Pacific region, despite the diversity in national economic, demographic and socio-cultural profiles. While being home to the largest number of people living in extreme poverty and of youth and adult illiterates in the world, coupled with gender inequality, concentrated in some parts of the region, Asia-Pacific is also a region that drives global development with some of the world’s biggest economies. Yet notwithstanding these differences, countries in the region are increasingly comparing themselves with higher-income countries in the region such as Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea and Singapore. This has resulted in increasing active policy benchmarking within the region, whereby South-South cooperation is taking the place of the traditional North-South transfer of policies. Together, these dynamics are resulting in a greater similarity in policy responses across multiple sectors, including education.
Implications for Education

Although education policy transfer has been taking place for centuries, the magnitude and speed of transfer is unprecedented. The world surrounding education has become increasingly complicated, influenced by global competition, international benchmarking, and financial constraints, to name just a few factors. The search for “best practice” has become a major preoccupation for national governments, often driven by international development partners, consultants, and academics.

As a result, education systems around the world seem to be converging into an “international norm.” At the level of policy objectives, building a “knowledge-based economy” or “knowledge-based society” through good quality education has become a mantra for every country, either developed or developing, and international development partners (both financial and technical) are actively facilitating education transfer in this area. In this process, similar policies were introduced in many countries under the flag of “improving the quality of education,” including a movement away from input-based to outcomes-based analysis and the quantification of learning results; greater involvement of the private sector in education both in financing and service delivery; focus on student-centred learning; and increased governance and accountability through greater scrutiny of education system performance.

For many policy makers, international standardized-assessments of student learning such as OECD’s PISA, TIMSS, and TALIS¹ have become some of the most important tools in setting trends of education policy reforms. While these assessments have traditionally focused mostly on cognitive skills, there is increased international reflection and research on looking at social outcomes of learning as well as on wider non-cognitive and so-called ‘softer’ skills beyond measurement of academic achievements, which include behavioural and emotional development, communication skills and interpersonal relationships, values, ethics, social responsibility, civic engagement, citizenship, and health (see OECD 2011 SQL Indicators, and University of London Institute for Education (IOE’s) Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL)).

As a recent publication (Breakspear 2012) points out, PISA results not only stir heated policy discussion, they also have a significant influence on policy reform in the majority of participating countries and economies. System Assessment and Benchmarking for Education Results, or SABER (World Bank 2012), a recent endeavour by the World Bank and UNESCO Bangkok, aims to develop an international benchmarking tool to interrogate the relationship between education policies and the quality of learning measured largely

¹ PISA = Programme for International Student Assessment; TIMSS = Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study; TALIS = Teaching and Learning International Survey.
using PISA scores. The willingness of countries to participate in these initiatives demonstrates that they are increasingly looking to international benchmarking and standards not only in inputs to education systems (e.g., public expenditure on education, teacher salary, and class size) but also in education systems design and implementation by looking at more qualitative aspects of education policies (see also McKinsey and Co. 2007 and 2010).

There is a growing awareness of the pressures being placed on public financing of education and a resulting need to seek more efficient use of these limited resources. This has brought about greater accountability in the investment of public resources for education, and turned attention to ways in which to supplement them through greater fiscal capacity, new partnerships with non-state actors, as well as through advocacy for increased official development assistance.

As a corollary, governments in Asia and the Pacific are also witnessing an increasing role of non-state actors in education financing and delivery. Private schooling is on the rise in many countries – both developed and developing – and numerous studies have shown that private household expenditure on education has increased in recent times (both in terms of private tutoring/shadow education and education support). This may reflect a real or perceived failure on the part of the public education system to deliver quality education for all, or simply households’ desire to keep up in an increasingly competitive economy. Either way, the implications for equity, efficiency, and quality are real, and attempts to address them raise thorny questions about choice, regulation and the appropriate role of government.

Increased focus on efficiency and effectiveness through accountability and good governance is another major trend in policy reforms. Decentralization – or more specifically, school-based management – has become a popular reform item in many countries, backed by some empirical evidence suggesting that it could be associated with improved learning. There is a move towards more decentralized policy planning, making, and implementation while developing necessary capacity at lower levels of authority remains a major challenge in many countries.

Taken together, these trends point to an increasingly complex education policy environment. While globalization in education policy-making has certainly benefited countries to take advantage of lessons learned and “leap-frog” in order to introduce policy reforms that demonstrated promising results elsewhere, there is a risk that such reforms are being introduced at the possible expense of accounting for local context. Existing studies show that education policies imported out of context will not be effective to produce desired results. In addition, studies have also pointed to the role that policy
‘competition’ can play in promoting innovation and performance; benefits which may be undermined by a movement toward greater homogeneity in education policy.

This panel will discuss the above trends in policy environment and their implications on education for all stakeholders, while making an effort to identify potential national and regional education policies that enable countries in the region to best respond to the changing world. It will also discuss how non-cognitive skills can be systematically included in student assessment, in order to inform policy making. It will further discuss financing of education, investigating both the role of government and household expenditures.

**Key questions for discussion**

1. What are the key current and future challenges and opportunities in the policy environment impacting on education and what are the implications for education policy making?

2. How can findings from student learning assessments be better harnessed for education policy making? How can assessment of learning be broadened to systematically include non-cognitive learning aspects, and be used effectively for policy making?

3. How are these new policy developments affecting key actors (teachers, students, parents, education leaders, policy-makers etc)?

4. How should non-state actors in education such as INGOs, IFIs, and private enterprises be taken into consideration for educational policy making and what should be the role of the State with regard to educational standard setting, quality control, equity, etc.

5. What are the key shifts in education finance that need to be taken into consideration for education policy making? What financial measures should be taken to use limited resources more efficiently? What role could non-state actors play to support education financing?

**References**


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