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The activities of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2008-2009

Contribution[1]
Committee on Culture, Science and Education
Rapporteur: Mr Jan KAŹMIERCZAK, Poland, Group of the European People's Party

A. Introduction

1. The annual report on "The activities of the OECD in 2008-2009", prepared by the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development, focuses on the activities of the OECD in the economic field. There is no doubt, however, that the activities of this Organisation cover a much wider area than the purely economic one.

2. The Committee on Culture, Science and Education is contributing the above-mentioned report by dealing with the activities of that organisation in the fields of education and science.

3. The contribution to the report from the Committee on Culture, Science and Education is based mainly on the Hearing and exchange of views which it held with OECD representatives during the committee meeting on 11 May 2009 in Paris. The OECD was represented by Mr Bernard Hugonnier, Deputy-Director for Education, Directorate for Education, and Mr Ian Gillespie, Head of Science and Technology Policy, Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry. Some sections of the report also draw on material published by the OECD.

I. Education

4. OECD activities in the field of education in the wider sense are mainly of a rather general nature, producing statistics and indicators on knowledge and competences, member states' policy reviews, thematic reviews and forecasts of future developments. These activities focus on the following fields:

– Early childhood education and care;

– The period of compulsory education (regarded as central to all education systems);

– Higher education;

– Adult education and training;

– Lifelong learning;

– Specific problems in the area of education (such as problems of equity and equality of opportunity).

5. The key findings and conclusions, as well as policy orientation, in the above-mentioned fields are presented in more detail in OECD publications such as "Education Today: the OECD perspective" (OECD 2009).

1. See Doc. 11985 prov. Tabled by the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development.

6. The OECD states that early childhood care – nursery and pre-primary childcare– is a growing priority in many countries. This priority is mainly reflected in an increasing demand from parents, and is also a part of a range of educational services which are increasingly recognised as a major contribution to a multitude of social, economic and educational goals. A major OECD review in this field was published in 2006. Its main policy thrusts were geared to overcoming the underdevelopment which prevails in many countries in this sector.

7. The OECD takes the period of compulsory education, i.e. primary, lower secondary, and even the upper secondary cycle in some countries, as being the core of all educational systems. In recent years, significant investments have been made in this segment of the education system, which is deemed vital for laying the foundation for so many other subsequent social, economic and educational outcomes.

8. The OECD concentrates on teachers as a key factor in the success of schooling. The OECD published a major paper entitled “Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers” in 2005. Policy orientations have stressed the need to simultaneously modernise, professionalise and innovate, while at the same time placing reforms geared to effective learning at the heart of schooling.

9. OECD analyses have shed extensive light on the issues, arrangements and policies surrounding the transition beyond compulsory schooling. Studies on guidance, information systems and qualifications in OECD member countries have shown that there is great scope for improving transitions. The OECD has highlighted the need to improve the existence, relevance and transparency of different ways forward, while protecting those who are left behind as their peers go on to further education and employment.

10. Higher education is being restructured throughout OECD countries and in particular in Europe, where the Bologna Process aims at a European Higher Education Area. This will have consequences on the mobility of students and teachers and on the quality of education. There are visible trends across the OECD, such as the growing international tertiary education market and more highly formalised quality assurance. The organisation has prepared a major review of tertiary education entitled “Guidelines for Quality of Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education”, and two new initiatives may be mentioned: the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) which explores the feasibility of comparing student outcomes in higher education; and the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) which aims to assess the supply and demand of competencies that impact on social and economic outcomes at the individual and aggregate levels.

11. OECD studies state that, in addition to the aforementioned area, adult participation in education and training should also be a focus of statistical work and programme and policy analysis. The data show how, for many countries, participation in formal education remains the exception for older adults. The OECD has conducted international reviews – the most recent published in 2005 – combining the educational and employment perspectives and studies of the provision of and policy on adult learning, with complementary studies on qualifications, ageing, and financing.

12. The OECD’s policy in the higher education field has included accepting that students should contribute to the cost of their studies (backed with appropriate safeguards). It has also mentioned the need to develop e-learning and guidance systems, as well as to reinforce the regional and innovative role of institute of higher education.

13. For many years now, lifelong learning has been a defining goal of education and training policies. Despite acknowledging its importance, holistic analyses of lifelong learning have featured less in the OECD’s work in recent years. Similarly, the comparative analytical approach adopted has shown that the implementation of this broad aim in different countries is inconsistent and, often, disappointing.

14. The work of the OECD is a rich source of information on educational outcomes. The best-recognised programme, namely the triennial PISA achievement survey, has been successfully running for 15 years now. This survey focuses on the educational achievements of 15-year-olds in different areas of competency, together with a growing range of associated background information, and is conducted in many non-OECD member countries, in addition to its member states.

15. The strong OECD focus on outcomes is set to expand beyond teenage achievements in a survey of adult competencies, more closely examining results at the higher education level. In its latest programme, the OECD is also going to investigate adult educational competency. The first results of this programme are expected to be published in 2013.

16. Analyses of developments and policies that influence equity have been an underlying priority in much of the OECD educational work. Inequality patterns have been highlighted, thanks to the improved quality of international data, which is facilitating analyses vis-à-vis many relevant groups of learners and their educational experiences. The OECD analysis has shown that there need be no contradiction between equity and efficiency, and that the phenomenon of exclusion and widespread underachievement is detrimental to both economic and social objectives. OECD publications have charted the opportunities, outcomes and policies towards different population groups, many of whom are disadvantaged, across many educational and training sectors, including long-term work on special educational needs.

17. Broadly speaking, according to various OECD publications, recognition of the key role of research and knowledge management in educational practice and policy-making is a recent development. Many countries have been underequipped for developing and exploiting the necessary knowledge base for improving practice and making policies more effective. Generally, the volume of relevant educational research and development tends to be low, despite the fact that education so explicitly concerns knowledge. Similarly, a great deal of the change that occurs in education still stems from short-term considerations, despite the fundamental long-term mission and nature of this sector. Educational research and development systems, knowledge management, forward thinking, and evidence-based policy and practice are all prominent aspects of the OECD's work, which is performed primarily through the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation.

Conclusions with respect to education

18. As OECD statistics show, constant increases in educational expenditure in OECD member countries have not produced better educational results. Educational efficiency in all member states is highly variable, and therefore, education authorities in every country should look into the available means of reducing the current inefficiency. As shown in a recent report, issued in June 2009, lack of inventiveness on the part of teachers and bad behaviour in the classrooms are the core reasons for educational dysfunctions.

19. Tertiary educational policy is gaining in importance on the national agendas. The widespread recognition that tertiary education is a major driving force for economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy has made high-quality tertiary education more important than ever before. The imperative for countries is to raise the level of employment skills, sustain a globally competitive research base and improve knowledge dissemination for the benefit of society. Publication of a comparative study will enable member countries to gauge themselves against the other countries' performance.

20. Equity in education is still not common practice. As the OECD's PISA assessment shows, the expansion of education systems has not enabled all young people to reach their full potential, and in some cases not even to acquire basic skills. Educational results are strongly influenced by social background. This is why fostering equity in education is one of the OECD's key objectives. A number of publications and conferences last year pointed out that the problem should be tackled on three fronts: the design of education systems, educational practices, and re-sourcing.

II. Science/research and development:

21. Science and technology policy, as well as a general background of an operational research and development sector, is very high on the OECD's agenda. For the OECD, science policy means looking at how to boost science and report on scientific work. The OECD also analyses the impact and role of science, for instance on human genetic research, global warming, food safety and other global challenges. Science is seen as a cross-sectoral and cross-departmental subject.

22. The OECD representatives at the meeting of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education in Paris made clear that the current activities of the organisation in the field of widespread science are concentrating on innovation as the key factor for the economic and social development of individual countries and societies. It emerged from the discussions that innovation is central to economic performance and social welfare.

23. In view of the above-mentioned circumstances, the OECD has developed an "Innovation Strategy", which might be described as an innovative policy/action agenda. The organisation publishes reports on the results of current analyses of the OECD Innovation Strategy. There are also more specialised contributions such as: "Innovation and Growth: Rationale for an Innovation Strategy" or "Policy Responses to the Economic Crisis: investing in Innovation for Long-Term Growth".

24. Today, as the crisis continues to unfold around the globe, the development of the OECD Innovation Strategy has taken on even greater relevance and urgency. Innovation will be one of the keys to emerging from the downturn and putting countries back on the path to sustainable – and more intelligent – growth. Yet

the crisis itself poses a number of serious risks and challenges to innovation performance which it will be necessary to counter. The stakes are high, and there is no option but to get the policies right. As governments undertake exceptional economic stimulus, their temporary interventions in the market provide a unique opportunity to maximise the impacts of public policy in fostering innovation and steering market actors towards innovation-related investments, and accelerating activities for which barriers may have been too high otherwise. If this opportunity is handled effectively, countries could be reaping the benefits for decades to come.

25. There is an emerging view that the global economy may be at a turning point, leading to a shift in paradigm. This is indeed an era of transition. The current crisis is the latest in a series of important phenomena which continue to transform modes of production and consumption and drive the search for new and more sustainable routes to value creation. Over the past decade, globalisation and the emergence of new and diverse players have continued to accelerate, opening up new markets and opportunities, but also requiring new strategies in order to benefit and to stay competitive. One result has been a change in the geography of innovation, with a less defined and more complex division of labour across cities, regions and countries. This has also been driven by changing demographics throughout the world. In OECD countries, dealing with an ageing workforce calls for new responses, be they through restructuring, migration, upgrading of skills or outsourcing.

26. OECD member states which are also European Union members ensure common standards and objectives in these areas (e.g. the Lisbon Strategy). However, some non-OECD countries such as China and India have become major platforms for scientific discovery and innovation. To keep up the pace OECD must hone its analysis on the areas of science and innovation. Whereas the OECD is not able to develop innovation strategy for all its member countries, it does provide country-specific advice on innovation. By the end of 2008, Reviews of Innovation Policy for Switzerland, Luxemburg, New Zealand, South Africa and Chile had been completed and several others are under way.

27. Across the OECD and beyond, society is playing a much more significant role in innovation than in the past. This also has some far-reaching implications for governance, and policy makers who are in many cases still trying to work out how best to “democratise” science and innovation and its subsequent use. Governance arrangements must take account of societal values in order to gain acceptance for many products of innovation. The increasing number and diversity of participants, and the globalisation of innovation networks, also calls for governance mechanisms that can cross boundaries as innovation policy spreads across an array of ministries, a range of public and private actors and geographically from local to regional to national.

28. Innovation often occurs when entrepreneurs explore new markets, ideas and opportunities. Entrepreneurs are also key in generating competitive pressures on incumbents, forcing them to innovate. Policy can foster entrepreneurship by facilitating the entry, exit and growth of firms, for example in lowering administrative and regulatory barriers, improving bankruptcy regimes and easing access to finance.

29. During the meeting in Paris, the representative of the OECD said that, at the moment, the organisation is not involved in studies concerning the support of entrepreneurial behaviour treated as a factor of increasing the knowledge-based model of economy. It was stated by members of the Committee during the discussion, that – especially in countries with more centralised economies – all activities geared to improving entrepreneurial thinking and behaviour, especially in the younger generations, could be important and effective factors for both economic and social growth. Moreover, other worldwide organisations (see for example the report “Educating the Next Wave of Entrepreneurs” by the World Economic Forum, Switzerland, April 2009) are aware of this problem.

Conclusions with respect to science/research and development

30. As OECD reports show, innovation is both a necessity and a chance for countries and societies in this time of global economic crisis. National policies, as well as practical forms of supporting scientific/R&D activities should concentrate on actions leading to knowledge-based economy.

31. Entrepreneurial thinking and the behaviour of individuals could be a key factor to improving innovation level in national economies. Therefore, national policies, including educational policy, should include tools for supporting this kind of behaviour in society.

General conclusions

32. The Committee on Culture, Science and Education regards the annual debate with the participation of the Secretary General of the OECD as well as working meetings with OECD representatives as a worthwhile exercise that should be continued.

B. Proposed amendments

The committee proposes that the following paragraphs be added to the draft resolution:

– "The enlarged Assembly welcomes the organisation of a meeting with the Governing Board of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in order to explore the pedagogical and ideological grounds of their work and examine the possibility of expanding the scope of their assessment to include civic awareness, creative skills and cultural education.

– The enlarged Assembly again encourages the OECD to pursue its studies on the efficiency of teaching and learning processes in order to formulate proposals to reverse the existing trend of increased educational expenditure with no improvement in educational results. Improving the efficiency of learning processes is essential in order to tackle the current insufficiency in adult competencies and to ensure the sustainability of adequate lifelong learning and continuing education systems.

– The enlarged Assembly encourages the OECD to consider looking into entrepreneurial thinking and behaviour treated as a factor of increasing the knowledge-based model of economy as – in particular in countries with more centralised economies – all activities geared to improving entrepreneurial thinking and behaviour, especially in the younger generations, could be important and effective factors for both economic and social growth."

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Committee for contribution: Committee on Culture, Science and Education

Reference to Committee: Standing mandate

Contribution adopted by the committee on 28 September 2009

Secretariat of the committee: Mr Ary, Mr Dossow and Mr Fuchs