

"Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives"
Presentation Abstract

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More than ever, skills transform lives and drive economies, skills have become the currency of 21st economies. The bottom line is simple: Without the right skills, people are kept on the margins of society, technological progress doesn't translate into economic growth, and countries can't compete in today's economies. But more education does not automatically translate into better economic and social outcomes. There is this toxic co-existence of unemployed graduates on our streets, while employers tell us that they cannot find the people with the skills they need.

To succeed with converting better skills into better jobs and lives we need to understand what those skills are that drive success and outcomes. We then need to ensure that the right skill mix is being delivered in effective, equitable and efficient ways. Our economies need to make good use of those skills. And we need to figure out much more creatively who should pay for what, when and how when it comes to the development of skills.

What does this imply for school systems?

In the past when economies only needed a small slice of well-educated workers it was sufficient, and perhaps efficient, for governments to invest a large sum into small elite to lead the country. But the social and economic cost of low educational performance has risen very substantially and the best performing education systems now get all young people to leave school with strong foundation skills.

When one could still assume that what one learns in school will last for a lifetime, routine cognitive skills were at the centre of education. Today, where routine cognitive skills are being digitised or outsourced, and where jobs are changing rapidly, education systems need to enable people to become lifelong learners, to manage complex ways of thinking and complex ways of working that computers can't take over easily. And they need to put the premium on lifelong skills-oriented learning instead of qualifications-focused education upfront. Compared to purely government-designed curricula taught exclusively in schools, learning in the workplace allows young people to develop "hard" skills on modern equipment, and "soft" skills, such as teamwork, communication and negotiation, through real-world experience.

All this requires a very different caliber of teachers. When teaching was about explaining prefabricated content, you could tolerate low teacher quality. And when teacher quality was low, governments told their teachers exactly what to do and exactly how they want it done, using prescriptive methods of administrative control and accountability. The most advanced education systems have made teaching a profession of high-level knowledge workers.

But people who see themselves as candidates for the professions are not attracted by schools organized like an assembly line, with teachers working as interchangeable widgets. Education systems therefore need to rethink their work organisation, to establish the status, professional autonomy, and the high-quality education that go with professional work, with effective systems of teacher evaluation and with differentiated career paths for teachers.