

Summary of the first Session

Relevance and Quality: What are the challenges?

First of all, we would like to thank the two experts who formalized the contents of this session in two very important papers, about challenges to the relevance issue in regard to teaching quality. We would also like to thank the participants to this session, including their Excellencies the Ministers and Ambassadors and the officials, for their contributions. This input has enriched discussions, and clearly reflected a unanimous agreement on the importance of this subject, and the necessity that all concerned countries deal with it seriously. Our apologies to their Excellencies the ministers, for not being able to include and document all observations expressed regarding the subject matter of the session. Since this summary is an overall account of the session, details will be left to the task force to finalize the relevant documents.

Issues discussed in this session can be summarized as follows:

1. There are serious efforts in the Middle East and North Africa to achieve the education relevance to the community needs; including the necessary skills and competencies that guarantee the success of the education outputs. These are represented by developing school management and curricula, and their relevance to employment, students' abilities, decentralization, teachers training and improving their financial situations, in addition to acquiring experiences of other countries and international organizations.
2. This challenge is reflected by several indicators, on top of which are the demographic and educational indicators in several Middle Eastern and North African countries. These include the continuous absence of decrease in illiteracy and the drop-outs of schools rates etc. On the other hand, comparative studies confirm the existence of a gap between students performance in the Middle East and North Africa and students in other countries. Nonetheless, some countries have started working on bridging this gap and participating in international competitions to assess their students' performance and improve outputs of their educational systems.

3. Since outputs of educational systems lack the required skills for employment, there is a need to provide graduates with additional training, and financial support after graduation. As mentioned during discussions, that several countries have good experience in this field, which can be beneficial to other countries.
4. The Middle East and North Africa region faces many challenges. These are represented by its inability to cope with accelerated technological and scientific developments. Therefore, these countries should spend great efforts in order to achieve education relevance to the constant variable economy needs. Thus, the support of the G8 countries to the Middle Eastern and North African countries is important to achieve the desired progress and overcoming challenges.
5. Failure to achieve education relevance to the needs of employers could result the region's inability of following the requirements of knowledge and technology, which are considered as essential factors in the changing world of today. There are such experiences in this field among the countries of G8 and some countries in the Middle East.
6. Other countries experiences refer to the possible success of the educational development process to achieve relevance, if the suitable conditions are available. The key to success in this development is having political support and national commitment.
7. Funding education should be on top of competing priorities on resources, noting that the issue of funding is not necessarily the cause of irrelevance in education and its continuity. As the key speakers referred to other causes.
8. Co-operation among the concerned parties through effective partnership is one of the important factors to achieve education relevance to society's needs. The private sector role and its positive interaction would be important with regard to the quality of outputs and their competencies.

9. It is important to employ technology in the education sector and make resources and relevant training opportunities available for teachers to ensure appropriate practice, and to improve teachers and student performance. There are promising starts in some countries' efforts in this field.

10. Interest in establishing educational databases would provide necessary information for educational decision making in relation to various inputs of the educational process through research in the education sector. There is a joint project between the Sultanate of Oman and UNESCO to establish a regional information centre concerned with the development of post basic education (11/ 12 Grades in Arab countries).

11. Changing the students' convictions and their attitudes is also one of the main factors of achieving relevance between the educational programmes and the students' needs. From this stems the importance of the vocational guidance in changing the dominant educational culture of the parents.

12. Emphasizing the importance of: (a) Controlling the standards and the bases upon which teachers are chosen, (b) Improving the teachers preparation programmes before and during their careers, (c) Giving attention to the individual distinctions among the students through providing them with the best learning opportunities available according to their aptitudes and abilities, plays an important role in achieving relevance and success of the educational systems. It is important to set up accountability systems to achieve the principle of having a positive balance between inputs and outputs.

13. The importance of guaranteeing transparency and accountability in the higher education sector to ensure that the educational services on this level are not confined to the elite but would benefit all other students' categories. No doubt that some countries have started setting up councils of academic accreditation to achieve this goal. The Bologna process can be considered as a model for some other countries to enrich their efforts in the higher education sector.

