

Integrating 21st Century Skills into Education Systems

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Abstract – Technology is rising quickly in enterprise and manufacturing in the 21st century. Education becomes more important in this century to ensure that students are trained, willing to invent, develop, collaboration and learn how to make use of their life skills. The complex meaning and excellence capabilities for their future generate challenges. The definition of skills of the 21st century has become extremely relevant as it represents changing job demands as well as the changing position of education. We will study the integration of expertise in school programs in the 21st century that concludes that those who commit themselves to the holistic view of education have plenty of research work to do, experience sharing, capacity building and advocacy around the potentials and needs of all countries, irrespective of their contexts, to move in this direction.

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be a successful learner or graduate in today's world? While in years past, a solid acquisition of the "three Rs" (reading, writing, and arithmetic) and mastery in the core academic subjects may have been the measure of attainment, the world of the 21st century requires a radically different orientation. To participate effectively in the increasingly complex societies and globalized economy that characterize today's world, students need to think critically, communicate effectively, collaborate with diverse peers, solve complex problems, adopt a global mindset, and engage with information and communications technologies, to name but just a few requirements. The new report from Brookings, "Education system alignment for 21st century skills: Focus on assessment," illuminates this imperative in depth.

Recognizing that traditional education systems have generally not been preparing learners to face such challenges, the global education community has increasingly talked about and mobilized in favor of the changes required. This has resulted in a suite of initiatives and research around the broad area of "21st century skills," which culminated most notably with the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 4

and the Education 2030 agenda, including Target 4.7, which commits countries to ensure that learners acquire knowledge and skills in areas such as sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, global citizenship, and others.

In this landscape, Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has a core mandate of improving equity and learning by strengthening education systems. GPE supports developing countries, many of which are affected by fragility and conflict, to develop and implement robust education sector plans. Depending on the country, GPE implementation grants support a broad range of activities including teacher training, textbook provision, interventions to promote girls' education, incentives for marginalized groups, the strengthening of data and learning assessment systems, early childhood education, and many other areas.

This work is buttressed by thematic work at the global level, including in the area of learning assessment. The strengthening of learning assessment systems is a strategic priority for GPE because of its relevance to both improving learning outcomes and ensuring effective and efficient education systems, which are two of the three key goals of the GPE strategic plan for the 2016-2020 period. The work on learning assessment includes

the Assessment for Learning (A4L) initiative, which aims to strengthen learning assessment systems and to promote a holistic measurement of learning.

Under A4L, we are undertaking a landscape review on the measurement of 21st century skills, using a definition derived from Binkley et. al. and Scoular and Care:

“21st century skills are tools that can be universally applied to enhance ways of thinking, learning, working and living in the world. The skills include critical thinking/reasoning, creativity/creative thinking, problem solving, metacognition, collaboration, communication and global citizenship. 21st century skills also include literacies such as reading literacy, writing literacy, numeracy, information literacy, ICT digital literacy, and communication and can be described broadly as learning domains.”

Using this lens, the landscape review examines the research literature, the efforts of GPE partners that have been active in this space, and data collected from a sample of countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia in regard to the assessment of these skills. These research efforts were led by Brookings and coordinated by the UNESCO offices in Dakar and Bangkok. As another important piece of this work, we are also taking stock of the latest education sector plans and implementation grants of these same countries (nine in sub-Saharan Africa and six in Asia), to explore the extent to which the integration of 21st century skills is reflected in sector plans and, vitally, in their implementation.

Though the work is in progress, the initial findings provide food for thought. Reflecting the conclusions of the new report by Brookings, as well as its earlier breadth of work on skills mapping, a large majority of these 15 countries note ambitious objectives related to 21st century skills in their education sector plans, particularly in their vision or mission statements and/or statements of policy priorities. “Skills” such as creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, life and career skills, citizenship, personal and social responsibility, and information and communications technology literacy were strongly featured, as opposed to areas such as collaboration, communication, information literacy, and met cognition.

However, when we look at the planned interventions noted in these sector plans, there is not a strong indication that countries plan to operationalize their intentions to promote 21st century skills. When we look at their implementation grants, which are one of the financing instruments through which education sector plans are implemented, only two of the 15 grants examined include activities aimed at promoting 21st century skills among their program components. Because the GPE model mandates that national governments determine the program components and allocation of resources for these within their grant, the bottom line seems to echo the

findings of the Brookings report: vision and aspiration are rife, but action is scarce.

While the sample of countries studied in this exercise is small (and other countries’ education sector plans and grants may well include integration of 21st century skills), it’s the disconnect between the 15 countries’ policy orientation around these skills and their implementation that is telling. Why this gap? Why, if countries espouse the importance of 21st century skills in their sector plans, do they not concretely move to addressing them in their implementation? The reasons for this may be manifold, but the challenges highlighted by the Brookings report in terms of incorporating a 21st century learning agenda in education systems are indeed telling. As a field, we still have much work to do to understand the nature of these skills, to develop learning progressions for them, and to design appropriate and authentic assessment of them. In other words, it may be that countries have difficulty in imagining how to move from rhetoric to reality.

However, in another perspective, there may be a challenge associated with how countries (and the broader education community) perceive 21st century skills in general. In contexts of limited resources, crowded curricula, inadequately trained teachers, fragility, weak governance, and other challenges that are characteristic of GPE partner countries, there is sometimes an unfortunate tendency to view 21st century skills and the “basics” as a tradeoff. In such settings, there can be a perception that 21st century skills are the concern of more advanced or higher-income countries. It is thus no wonder that, in the words of the Brookings report, “a global mobilization of efforts to respond to the 21CS [21st century skills] shift is non-existent, and individual countries struggle alone to plan the shift.”

This suggests that those who are committed to a holistic view of education have much work to do in terms of research, sharing of experience, capacity building, and advocacy around the potential and need for all countries, regardless of context, to move in this direction. The Brookings report makes a very valuable contribution in this regard. GPE’s landscape review, which will be published this spring, will inform how the partnership thinks about and approaches 21st century skills in its work and will thereby provide a complementary perspective.

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