

Preface

Research and learning have at least one aspect in common – both are a means used to acquire knowledge. In my view, they always enhance each other. When China, like many other countries in the world, looks increasingly toward other countries to seek inspiration and learn from their lessons, international comparison becomes an indispensable part of most significant studies. Having worked in policy analysis for years, I was thus curious to know how policies were made in various countries during the rapidly changing times of the past decade. Nonetheless, I failed to locate any systematic analysis of recent policy developments in the major developed and developing nations in the world even after painstaking search. That is why I embarked on this international comparative study of education policies. It turned to be a journey of discovery.

The focus of the study was finally set on the G20, which represents 80 % of the GDP and two-thirds of the world population. To obtain an “insider” perspective of policy reform trends, experts from G20 economies were invited to contribute chapters on the topic. All the authors are specialists with accomplished expertise in policy studies and first-hand experiences in policy making, thus could offer valuable insights into the developments of the past couple of decades among G20 members. A compilation of their responses would be a useful reference tool for policy-makers, researchers, and educators and also point to global education trends on policy-making.

Education reforms are always interwoven with, if not driven by, economic and political changes. Therefore, Part I highlights the education reforms in the recently changing economic and political fabric. The ideological context changes, such as from democratization to meritocracy in France, entail certain changes in how the curriculum is presented, how learning is organized, and even how schooling is structured. Intended or not, all these changes inevitably impact the construction and implementation of the value system, social equity, and economic well-being.

The past decade has also witnessed a dramatic reform in education governance in many countries, and typical examples are presented in Part II. Some countries, like Italy, shifted from a state monopoly to the rise of a system of schools; others have striven to improve the efficiency of the system by persistent endeavors of

decentralization. Yet, both have had to reconcile the principles and acts of decentralization with centralization. Meanwhile, reinforcing autonomy and strengthening accountability, especially by benchmarking, has been a central theme in many countries.

Notably, changing policy paradigms features education reforms in other nations elaborated in Part III. In a federal country, such as Australia, emerging national partnerships and agreements have changed the landscape of education dramatically. The new policy paradigms, such as those transforming the philosophy and aim of educational delivery, have played a key role in translating reform endeavors into results. Such changes are in many cases accompanied by a shift in upper-level developmental strategies, such as the need for a “coherent national strategy for human capital development” (in Saudi Arabia) and a “strive for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth” (in the EU).

Whatever approach will finally fall on the ground of changes in the education systems, the fundamental tasks of the education reform. Part IV narrates typical cases of education system reforms, such as incremental steps to more responsibility and efficiency in an expanding system in Germany. These reforms, either accomplished by reinforcing upper secondary education to build new paths for young people or by improving school trajectories, all revolve around the dual motifs of quality and equity. Yet, in spite of many similarities, every nation must take a unique path that suits its specific requirements. In a stable system such as that found in Canada, quality was seen being attributable to external factors as far as a desired social safety net, whereas in China, the education progress was highlighted for its strategy of building equity into the national basic policy for the livelihood of all the people.

It is noteworthy that this type of study warrants a reliable conceptual framework to thread the stories together from different contexts. Yet, sticking to any framework too strictly might be at the cost of both diversity and originality. Thus, this study has adopted a basic framework that incorporates five key questions: What major policy reforms have been developed? What were the assumptions underpinning these policies? What are the impacts of the reforms? What lessons have been learned? What are the future trends? While all the chapters are largely based on these questions, both originality and diversity in analysis and presentation have been maintained to produce a fuller picture of the educational reforms taken in different countries.

When undertaking a research publication of this sort, it is essential to have a supervisor who is knowledgeable and ready to open new paths to explore. Professor Yuan assumed this role perfectly. Not only did I have his full support in launching the project, but he also extended invitations to the authors and patiently answered all my queries throughout the entire process. He also contributed the chapter on China.

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