The Changing Role of Education in Dynamic Asia

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Being an education person, I believe I have the privilege to say that "education" is the main key to success not only of one's life but also collectively of a nation's growth. I am grateful to Hitachi to have invited me to join this panel of "The Changing Role of Education in Dynamic Asia" and to be given the opportunity to share with you, the young leaders of Asia, my experience and view on the issue.

Yesterday, you heard the wisdom of reputable politicians, bureaucrats, academicians as well as business leaders on the economic and environmental dimensions of *"Dynamic Asia"*. Now, I will concentrate specifically on the education dimension.

Many of us are thinking in consonance in acknowledging the importance of education and its role in nation building. But we are also pondering whether education is responding to the needs of the society at large. Are we simply conducting and delivering educational services as rituals or as traditions we have passed on from generation to generation? Are we screening *the cream of the crop* just to put them through classes after classes and finally to say "Well done, congratulations" when they graduate?

Rapid macro-economic changes in the global and national economies demand for strategies which have high flexibility for us to respond quickly, yet in well-planned manner to provide remedies to social problems confronted by our peoples. At present levels of developments, close to 80% of the world population is in poverty and almost 70% can neither read nor write. Let's turn our attention to school attendance. As much as 30% of our global citizens have never attended even primary school. Only 1% of the world population would have received college or university education. To exemplify the case with a seemingly exaggerated statistic, only one person out of our global community at an interval of once in every 200 years would have the chance to study abroad. Can governments realize the goal of "Education for All"? Will access to education be expanded and resources mobilized to achieve the goal?

Education will strengthen the labor force, making it more productive as the economy evolves so that it becomes one of the dynamic engines for national growth.

Strategic Objective

Education is the driving force for national development and economic growth. Education is also an individual's asset for personal livelihood and well being. A productive labor force is most desirable to ensure growth of a nation. This brings us to another question of how education can respond coherently to the need and demand of the labor force and market and contribute to relevant human capacity building.

Education gives people the skills they need to help themselves *out of poverty* or, in other words, into prosperity. In some countries, one additional year of schooling can increase wages by as much as 10%. Education supports the growth of *civil society* and the acquisition of skills and knowledge necessary to drive that. Education allows people to learn about *better healthcare* so that they are able to prevent diseases and use health services effectively. This means savings for healthcare and could mean more funds for more extensive educational services.

To shape education's role in maximising human potential for regional dynamism, factors than need attention are, to name a few, demographics, trade and investment and governmental policy.

The first factor I wish to bring forward is demographical issues. The future demographic scenario portrays a more stretched retired age group, which means increases in pension expenditure. Low birth rates imply a smaller productive age group, which means less revenue for the state. Migration and mobility of people across borders may intensify the problem of planning and balancing the national budgetary accounts. Likewise, a new approach is needed to educate the new generation in order for them to drive the economy of the nation and to become a productive work force in the global community.

The second factor is *trade and investment.* There will be widening gaps in the size and scale of businesses. We are now experiencing a wider spread of types of business ranging from entrepreneurs to SMEs, and large domestic conglomerates to trans-national corporations. The new breed of businesses such as e-commerce, e-banking, and many other kinds of e-business/transaction requires a new set of skills which have great implication on educational provision. Education and training needs to deal with specific needs as much as the multidisciplinary requirement of modern trade and employment. Regardless of any specialization of studies, the core skills center around communication utilizing both languages and ICT. In addition, management and life skills are equally essential. Such requirements makes curriculum design and pedagogy even more complicated and demands a better-trained teaching force.

Government policy is the third factor having direct impact on education. Most governments in Asia still cannot fund compulsory education to reach 12 years due to limited resources. This raises the more general question of who should pay for the expansion of educational opportunities. In general, the government takes care of the provision of basic education, making it compulsory for at least four years in much less developed countries to 12 years in the more advanced ones. Compulsory education usually implies provision by the government at no cost or minimal cost possible for the students. Beyond compulsory education, stakeholders contribute to the cost of education. It includes partial funding from governments, communities and parents. For secondary and tertiary education, government funding or subsidies may vary from one country to another. In general, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries on the average spend about 5% of their GDP for education. More advanced countries put aside as much as 7% of their GDP for education expenditure. In Asia, government expenditures for education are, on the average, slightly over 4% of their GDP. These figures are dated a few years back, so the value may have increased but the proportional rate may probably vary very slightly.

Market Demand

The emergence of ICT in modern life and living is well noted, and recognition of ICT as an integral part of almost all trades and businesses can be seen all over the world. As earlier mentioned on the new breed of businesses, new graduates will be expected to possess multidisciplinary proficiency and capacity required by the demand of the labor market. Communication and managerial skills will become indispensable for anyone seeking employment.

Transnational trade and industry also require workforce with knowledge relating to cross-border agreement and transaction. Globalization and regionalization bring about mobility of peoples of diverse nationality and culture, therefore cross-cultural understanding and areas studies become essential in human capacity building's contribution to achieving peace and harmony in the society.

Changing Role of Education

Asian countries express concerns, in various forms, of maximizing the potentials of the peoples to achieve a better Asia and to participate more effectively in the global economy. With all factors considered as presented previously, many Asian governments are shifting their focus of education from expansion to quality and efficiency, particularly in educational provision and outcomes.

For basic education, attention is on adopting ICT in schools to familiarize students with technology and its role in modern living and careers. Foreign languages are introduced to primary school students to ensure that a cohort of qualified students continue on to secondary schools and tertiary education institutions. At secondary education level, students also learn management skills through project assignments in school, and experience the teamwork, simple research, analytical thinking, and effective communication. New environments and opportunities are provided for students to experiment, with teachers as facilitators. Public and private sectors join hand in providing opportunities for youth to excel through various kinds of competitions and recognition at the national scale. Such activities cultivate innovativeness, creativity and self-confidence for students.

At tertiary education level, graduates are critical factors to raise the productivity level of a nation's economy. I would like to say that university education is universal. The knowledge learned and cultured transcends boundaries of the nations. There is more cooperation in education than in any other sector. If any competition exists, it is on the quality of education put forward. Universities need to provide the best possible learning facilities while performing its core functions teaching, research, community service and preservation of arts and culture. Asian universities are increasingly responsive to *the mobility* of the world population, by offering international opportunities on campuses for both in-bound and out-bound students and staff. Universities are promoting more international exposure and involvement of courses and research activities. Foreign languages and area studies

are receiving extensive attention by the administration on the supply side and by the foreign students on the demand side.

Credit transfer schemes are being adopted to recognize studies completed in other institutions within the country and beyond. Recognition of educational quality assurance mechanisms, on a national or regional level, will help increase opportunities for people to pursue further education at any place and time of their lives. Consequently, this will lead to degree recognition and to recognition of professional standards among nations or even among regions.

The best facilities in education are more readily available in the more advanced countries whose population growth could be much less than 1%. In developing countries, a great need for further education persists with the lack of facilities. The trend today and over the past century has seen student mobility change from a one-way movement in the past to a more reciprocal one in the recent years. For example, New Zealand reported having only 100 Chinese students in 1990, but the number grew to 23,000 in 2005. This year, the UK enrolled 40,000 foreign undergraduate students, 12,068 of which are from the European Union. A quarter of the 200,000 foreign students in Germany are Asians, the second highest number after the EU. Last year, Chinese universities enrolled 100,000 overseas students from nearly 200 countries around the world. The surge in the number of international students helps make Chinese universities more international.

Conclusion

Education will become more student-centered, with core skills such as language, ICT, management and life skills being emphasized. Subjects will be more integrated and reflective of the local context, allowing teachers more freedom to develop teaching-learning materials for respective lessons undertaken schools. A better trained teaching force will be required to comprehend the learning needs and deliver the subject matters.

Advanced education will focus on quality and standard, learning environments, and allowing for academic and professional mobility to maximize utilization of facilities available in universities across countries. Cross-utilization of existing resources across subject areas, public and private sectors, and different levels of administration needs to be maximized to benefit all stakeholders.