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Changing Competence Needs and International Comparative Assessments

Economic development presupposes high-quality education. Education makes it possible for individuals to find their place in the labour market and provides skills transferable to the rapidly changing needs of working life. Education also generates industrial and economic innovations. These two functions of education have been boosted by increasing international competition and automatization, which has largely replaced low-education jobs. However, the strengthening link between education and economy may pose a threat to the independence of the institution of education. Education is a value per se which does not need to be justified by economic gain or social equality. Essentially, education is about civilizing individuals and nations. When successful in this, education also adds value to the other sectors of society, thereby contributing to overall well-being.

In several countries, the current debate on education is dominated by the requirement for increased productivity and effectiveness. Education is expected to yield competences that are directly transferable to the needs of the labour market. Young people likewise appreciate the immediate benefits of education. At the same time, the civilizing function of education has been largely ignored. The threat is that schools produce competent and skilled people with, however, increasingly limited ability to understand other humans and their own humanity.

International comparative assessments of educational achievement have attracted wide public interest. Primarily, the interest of both politicians and the media has lied in how countries have ranked in these assessments, whereas little attention has been paid to the reasons behind these rankings.

The purpose of this presentation is to show, with the help of examples, how, for instance, PISA data can be used to analyze special characteristics of educational systems. Results of comparative assessments can be used to give political and pedagogical recommendations on how to implement long-term educational renovations. In the end, these results need to be interpreted within the cultural and historical context of each country.

- Prof. Dr. Jouni Välijärvi, EARLI2017 Keynote Speaker, May 2016.

