



Moving From Education Systems to Learning Societies

In the future, learning will become even more important to every part of global society. Advanced skills are the foundation of our ability to innovate, to drive economic growth, to improve our societies, and to address the environmental challenges of the 21st century.

To meet this demand, learning needs to be personal, flexible, and lifelong. As a result, we must conceive of learning as an activity, not a place. And learning systems need to spread far beyond schools and universities, to become wide open to new people with new ideas, and to involve learners and parents as contributors as well as customers. Although formal education systems will remain important, building more schools and more universities will not be enough to meet these new demands.

The world needs a new learning system: one that is characterized by new ways of organizing learning, new forms of assessment and credentialing, different models of investment and funding, and a fit for purpose infrastructure. We call this the *Learning Society*.

An Endless Demand for Learning

Globalization increases competition and means that people need deeper, more specialized skills. But new patterns of working and living mean that there's greater demand for interdisciplinary knowledge and 21st century skills like collaboration, problem solving, and creativity.

At the same time the social, economic, and environmental challenges of the 21st century demand citizens with the capacity and passion to engage with the world's problems both at home and abroad.

All societies — those with aging populations and those with youth bubbles — will require more people to be economically active throughout their lives. This demands not only a lifelong learning infrastructure but also a renewed and repurposed investment in the earliest years of learning. It's critical that those years provide strong foundations for future knowledge and instill a love of learning that will motivate people for the learning journey ahead.

Existing Education Systems Face Enormous Challenges

Education systems have done well in responding to society's demands for learning. Literacy is up, and more children spend more time in school than ever before. However, even the best schools and universities seem unable to meet the growing and changing global demand for learning.

The scale of this challenge is enormous. It has been estimated that 10 million new teachers will be needed to get an additional 260 million students into education systems in China, India, Indonesia, and Nigeria alone. In larger, more established education systems, significant challenges remain: student drop-out rates are high, education often perpetuates inequality, and increases in attainment are tailing off.

Bigger Is Not Better: We Need a New Approach

Emergent solutions to these problems do exist but most education systems have proven resistant to innovation. Decades after first attempting, many still struggle to adopt successful practices that have emerged in community learning, informal adult education, work-based learning, and peer learning.

As a consequence, we cannot rest our hopes on engineering bigger, better, more efficient, more innovative school systems. We need to think beyond the school and create a *Learning Society*.

Early Signals of the *Learning Society*

- In leading-edge learning practice — where innovation is cutting across the old divides of formal education and informal learning.
- In wider society, particularly the adoption of new technologies: the rise of social networking, “edutainment”, the open source movement, and new trends in educational technologies.
- In disruptive innovations at the margins of established education systems and in extreme environments, often in the developing world.

Working Together to Build the *Learning Society*

For too long, we have considered learning in isolation. In most countries, “Education” is a separate branch of government policy, and a separate activity from our daily lives. Building a *Learning Society* means mobilizing new structures, new approaches, and new technology to deliver a new balance of skills to a lifelong learning population. With this in mind, we make the following recommendations:

- 1 A *Learning Society* needs strong stewardship from a **new coalition** of governments, businesses, NGOs, and social investors who together bring the legitimacy, innovation, and resources that can make it a reality.
- 2 *Learning Societies* need **a mixture of learning providers** — public, private, and third-sector organizations and individuals that provide content, learning opportunities, and instruction to learners of all ages.
- 3 Telecom providers (supported by governments) must ensure access to a **shared learning infrastructure** — the roads and rails of the *Learning Society*. Making learning easy to access is fundamental to encouraging uptake, and requires seamless, high-quality, low-cost (and at times no-cost) connectivity at home, at work, on the move, and in public spaces.
- 4 All groups — including employers, unions, communities, and individuals — must be prepared to **invest more time and money** in learning.
- 5 Mixed provision of lifelong learning demands **new funding models** to make it easier to invest in learning.
- 6 International organizations and social investors should lead governments and businesses in a long-term process to develop **legitimate, standard credentialing systems** that create portable qualifications that are recognized around the world.
- 7 **Global assessment regimes must be reformed**, rewarding skill development, not just content knowledge, and restructuring themselves around stage, not age.
- 8 Rapid progress and the avoidance of duplication requires the development of a **standard framework for assessing the impact of innovations in learning**. This must be supported by substantial funding for rigorous independent evaluation of innovations and for the recording and dissemination of the results.
- 9 The *Learning Society* must innovate **new ways of managing lifelong support relationships with the learner**. Learners should have access to an independent, trusted mentor to whom they can turn for advice, support, encouragement, and information. This relationship must, in turn, be supported by a private, permanent, secure, and independent storage space for recording achievement — much like a health record.
- 10 *Learning Societies* must **fund a diversity of innovators** — from spreading known models to experimental work on high-risk/high-reward projects. Governments should develop learning systems as “good adopters”: being open to new ideas, hospitable to innovative individuals, and giving credit where it is due. To drive innovation, a *Learning Society* must actively encourage new entrants and not allow monopolies to persist.

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