

Six Questions about The World Bank's 2020 Education Sector Strategy

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Abstract: Based on interviews with World Bank staff in April 2011, this article answers six questions about the World Bank's Education Sector Strategy 2020 (ESS 2020): (1) What is the ESS 2020? (2) What is it not? (3) How was the development process of the ESS 2020 different from that of past Strategies? (4) How are the policy recommendations of the ESS 2020 different from those of past Strategies? (5) Does the ESS 2020 fit in with the World Bank's broader development strategy? And finally, (6) does the ESS 2020 matter?

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1. Introduction

In April 2011, the World Bank published a revised version of strategic plan for the work it will do in the education sector. This article presents findings from interviews with nine World Bank staff in April 2011 about the new World Bank Education Sector Strategy (ESS 2020). Using these interviews, this article answers six questions: What is the ESS 2020? What is it not? How was the development process of the ESS 2020 different from that of past Strategies? How are the policy recommendations of the ESS 2020 different from those of past Strategies? Does the ESS 2020 fit in with the World Bank's broader development strategy? And finally, does the ESS 2020 matter?

Each interviewee was asked a series of open-ended questions and follow-up questions. Initially, interviewees were asked, "How is the ESS 2020 different from previous ones?" and "What were some of the internal debates during the preparation of the ESS 2020?" They were assured that their identities would be protected. The interviewees consisted of six economists (three specializing in the economics of education), one education sociologist, one education psychologist, and one education comparativist. Eight of the nine interviewees were senior level staff.

2. What is the ESS 2020?

All the interviewees said that the target audience for the ESS 2020 consists of government ministers of education and other bureaucrats in the Bank's client countries. The secondary audience includes members of academia, NGOs, and international organizations. According to the interviewees, an understanding of the target audience is essential before directing criticism at the ESS 2020. The language and presentation of

the ESS 2020 are designed to resonate with government bureaucrats. The interviewees said that clients are not interested in having statements about issues such as human rights and causal inference methodology in the ESS 2020.

The ESS 2020 reveals what the Bank believes will work in education. Client countries can choose to accept, modify, or reject the Bank's ESS recommendations. The Bank's beliefs in the ESS 2020 can be summed up in two words: "learning" and "systems." The new emphasis on "learning" is based on the difficult lesson that access to schools does not necessarily result in learning. Consequently, the ESS 2020 marks a shift in the Bank's position from "access for all" to "learning for all."

The "systems" emphasis has two components. The first component is that the document recognizes the importance of all levels of the education system, from early childhood to higher education. The emphasis on early childhood is new for the Bank and draws from the research on industrialized countries that provides evidence that early investment in high quality preschool contributes to cognitive development and better adult labor market outcomes. One interviewee attributed the focus on early childhood education to the scholarship of economics Nobel laureate James Heckman. The ESS 2020's emphasis on higher education is a change from the relatively secondary position it has in previous strategies.

The second component of the ESS 2020's systems approach is that for any level of education, careful attention needs to be paid to: the inputs, processes, and outcomes of education. For the Bank, the focus on the process stage is new and reflects the movement in industrialized countries to hold teachers, administrators, and parents accountable for using educational inputs appropriately to achieve at least minimally acceptable

educational outcomes. The scientific basis for accountability been influenced by the growth of evaluation research in industrialized and developing countries, particularly randomized evaluations.¹

3. What is it not?

The interviewees argued that the ESS 2020 is not a literature review. They reemphasized that the key audience is clients, not those in academia. Of the 117 citations, there were only 3 citations to education journals and no citations to comparative education journals. At least 58 Bank documents or staff publications were cited. When asked if the approach made the Bank appear insular, several interviewees said that the cited Bank-authored documents were literature reviews. It was also claimed that clients have an easier time accessing Bank documents (often freely available on the Bank’s website) than the original books, journal articles and book chapters.²

The interviewees expressed the desire not to produce a “how-to guide” or “solutions manual.” When asked for an explanation, the interviewees envisioned the establishment of data collection systems (such as the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics), monitoring systems (such as the U.S. Department of Education’s “What Works Clearinghouse”), and rigorous evaluation procedures (such as the randomized

¹ Such evaluation methods draw from medical research, where one group receives a treatment and another group is a control group that does not. Researchers then monitor the behavior of both groups, and after a certain point, compare outcomes. To initiate the culture of randomized evaluations, the Bank collaborated with leading social scientists. The Bank hired University of California—Berkeley economics professor Paul Gertler as its Chief Economist of the Human Development Network from 2004 to 2006. Bank staff and clients also engaged in frequent consultation with the Jameel Poverty Action Lab, including MIT economics professors Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo and Harvard economics professor Michael Kremer.

² Among the Bank produced literature reviews, the most exhaustive and recent is Bruns, Filmer and Patrinos (2011).

evaluations conducted at MIT's Jameel Poverty Action Lab) that could be used to generate specific policy solutions appropriate for the context. With these resources in place, the interviewees believe that each client could design customized education policies, preferably based on the learning and systems approach.

4. How was the development process of the ESS 2020 different from that of past Strategies?

The ESS 2020 is different from past strategies in its development and content. Several interviewees admitted that past strategies were often developed behind closed doors by a small team of like-minded male economists. In contrast, the team behind the ESS 2020 included a larger share of women and non-economists. The preparation of the ESS 2020 also involved a more inclusive process. The interviewees praised ESS 2020 leader and Bank Director of Education Elizabeth King's efforts in establishing a sense of collaboration and inclusiveness among the core team of educational specialists that developed the document.

Though preparation was inclusive, all interviewees acknowledged that there were disagreements among Bank personnel on some of the issues and positions included in the ESS 2020. Some felt that the ESS 2020 was not inclusive of some important topics. One interviewee, for example, wanted a section on the advances in education psychology that could be applied to developing country settings. A senior interviewee countered that Bank clients are not generally interested in such topics, and, for those who are, the Bank already provides free online access to a book on the topic (i.e., Abdadzi, 2006). Another issue of disagreement was the future role of the private sector in education—with only

one interviewee suggesting that the private sector was not emphasized enough in the ESS 2020. Most interviewees agreed that the modest emphasis on the private sector reflects an ideological change in the Bank. One interviewee noted that the newer staff showed a deeper awareness of evidence-based policymaking; another interviewee fondly discussed the healthy skepticism toward free-market ideology among newer staff.³

Another difference in preparation between the ESS 2020 and past strategies is the involvement of Bank clients and stakeholders. Comments were solicited at 24 sites and in virtual meetings in all client regions (Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe). Clients and stakeholders were consulted on whether the contents of the ESS 2020 resonate with their concerns. According to the interviewees, the draft reports were well received at the meetings. The interviewees did not recall cases of significant opposition to the final draft of the ESS 2020.

5. How are the policy recommendations of the ESS 2020 different from those of past Strategies?

The ESS 2020 recommendations reflect the third phase of education policy thinking at the Bank (for discussions, see Heyneman, 2003; Mundy, 2002; and

³ Some of the ideological shift began with the hiring of Joseph Stiglitz as the Chief Economist of the World Bank in 1997. Stiglitz challenged much of the free-market ideology that had dominated World Bank development policy. As evidence of the changing ideologies within the Bank, one interviewee drew attention to an article by lead economist Halsey Rogers (2010) that said, “On the one hand, changed global circumstances and new awareness of vulnerability should lead to some policy changes, as developing countries take steps to reduce and buffer risks, including risks generated in developed countries. At the same time, the crisis should largely reinforce the Post-Washington Consensus on development that has emerged over the past decade—a world view that aims to achieve private sector-driven growth but sees a facilitating role for the state, promotes engaging with the global economy in ways that advance development, and values pragmatism, experimentation, and evidence-based policymaking over ideology.”

Psacharopoulos, 2006). In the first phase (1980s), the strategy recommendations were inspired by the success of manpower planning in post-World War II Germany and Japan. The strategies during this period therefore recommended using vocational and higher education to prepare future workforces. After years of tracking client countries, the Bank eventually understood the ineffectiveness of manpower planning. As former staff education economist George Psacharopoulos (2006) quipped, "... trying to predict the number of people with given educational qualifications to meet production requirements was a vain exercise, often leading to forecast errors of 1000 percent."

In the second phase (late 1980s to mid 2000s), the Bank education strategies recommended school access for all children and the provision of school inputs at the primary and secondary education levels. Early in this second phase, the Bank hired architects to design and build schools in client countries. The second phase gained momentum after the hiring of economists and a few quantitative sociologists, who began investigating the effect of school inputs, such as per-pupil expenditure, teachers, and supplies in developing countries (e.g., Heyneman and Loxley, 1983). The Bank's research and policies that were related to school inputs was influenced by the increase in Western school input studies and the expanding of computing power that followed the Coleman Report in 1966.⁴

As discussed earlier, in the third and current phase, the ESS 2020's recommendations on learning and systematic approach encompasses all levels of

⁴ For readers who lack familiarity with the Coleman Report: The prominent American education sociologist James Coleman and colleagues were commissioned by President Lyndon B. Johnson to investigate the relationship between school resources and student outcomes. Coleman and colleagues concluded that family characteristics—not school characteristics—were the main determinants of student outcomes. The Coleman Report was subsequently challenged by numerous social scientists.

education (from early childhood to higher education) and the stages of educational input, process, and output. Given the unprecedented breadth in content, the ESS 2020 is the Bank's most ambitious strategy to date.

6. Does the ESS 2020 fit in with the World Bank's broader development strategy?

The World Development Report (WDR) records the World Bank's development strategy at various times. Several interviewees noted the influence of the 2004 and 2007 WDRs on the ESS 2020. *WDR 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People* reflected the broader anti-corruption strategy under former Bank President James Wolfensohn (1995-2005). Regarding education, WDR 2004 argued that corrupt education systems compromise learning. In recent years, the Bank had accumulated anecdotal and empirical evidence of corruption in education, such as teacher absenteeism (e.g. Chaudhury et al., 2006).

The ESS 2020's emphasis on learning was influenced by *WDR 2007: Development and the Next Generation*. In the WDR 2007, the Bank argued that skills development is essential for addressing development challenges like that of youth unemployment. The WDR 2007's focus reflected the fact that several developing regions had "youth bulges"—the demographic phenomenon of a disproportionately large share of youth relative to non-youth. Recent discoveries of youth involvement in extremist activities—including the tragic 9-11 attacks in New York—further motivated the youth theme of the WDR 2007. The ESS 2020 focus on learning (rather than just access) from preschool to higher education is aimed at preparing youth for jobs that benefit themselves, the economy, and society.

The focus on education data is consistent with the vision of current Bank President Robert Zoellick. From 2007 to 2011, the New York Times (2011) reports that he has overseen the release of over 7,000 data sets that were previously available only to governments and selected researchers; Zoellick also declared that, “the Bank’s most valuable currency is no longer its money but its information.”

7. Does the ESS 2020 Matter?

Will client countries adopt the “learning” and “systems” approach recommended in the ESS 2020? The interviewees were unsure. The predicament at the Bank is that it has presented its most ambitious strategy despite declining financial influence and staff size. (Several interviewees mentioned that the Bank would face sharper criticism if it had prepared a (simpler) ESS 2020 modeled after past strategies.) At the very least, the interviewees felt that the ESS 2020 resulted in improved perceptions about the Bank among client countries because of the inclusiveness in its development.

Some interviewees discussed another potential effect. If client countries are persuaded by the ESS 2020, the interviewees envisioned assisting clients in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of education data in a manner that parallels the *Living Standards Measurement Surveys (LSMS)*—household surveys that are collected by the Bank and client governments, which are then made available on the Bank’s website. All interviewees hoped that domestic and international researchers would use such detailed data on teachers, administrators, and students. The Bank intends to add to its guidebooks on data analysis and impact evaluation (e.g. Deaton, 1997; Khandker et al, 2010).

With more people investigating richer data, the interviewees foresaw evidence-based debates on the strengths and weaknesses of proposed education reforms (involving alternative learning and systems approaches) in client countries. As a model, one interviewee cited the evidence-based debates on poverty and inequality in India (Deaton and Kozel, 2005).

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