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Pocket Watch – How are we doing? Education at a Glance 2014

Introduction

It takes more than a glance to take in the mass of facts and figures wedged into the OECD's latest '*Education at a Glance*' survey of education systems in 40+ countries published this week. With '*150 charts, 300 tables and over 100,000 figures*' spread over 500 or so pages, it remains very much the authoritative handbook on how different systems are performing and as such is treated with due regard by politicians, professionals and interested observers alike.

Headline messages for the UK

For politicians, or at least government ministers, the welcome news is that government spending in education was well above the OECD average: "*despite a 2.5% fall in GDP over the period, public expenditure on educational institutions grew by 17%, the largest increase as a percentage of GDP across OECD countries.*" The period referred to is 2008-2011 so only up to the first year of the Coalition and as the Office for Budget Responsibility has just warned us, further cuts are to come but not all countries managed to keep things afloat during the recession and to add further gloss, our contentious higher ed funding system is recognised as a potential model for the future.

The teaching profession may be interested to discover that we have on average one of the youngest teaching forces, 31% of our primary teachers are under 30 against an OECD average of 13%, that teachers are relatively well paid but that they have larger teaching groups than in many other countries, an average 21:1 at primary and 16:1 at secondary against OECD averages of 15:1 and 13:1 respectively. As for interested observers, parents may be interested to learn that we have a higher than average number of 3 and 4 year olds enrolled in education while university students may be relieved to hear that job and pay prospects remain higher than for those without that level of qualification but females will be less pleased to hear that the pay differential with men remains high at 20% at least in the UK.

And on the downside?

The biggest fault line in the UK education system remains provision and progress for low-skilled young adults. It has been cited in OECD reports before and despite the raising of the participation age, an extensive programme of vocational reforms and the renewed focus on apprenticeships, this remains quite clearly a hard nut to crack. The figures given in the OECD Report relate to 2012 and cover 15-29 year olds so comparisons with the Government's own figures which on the last count released in August showed NEET figures falling, are difficult. The plain truth in the OECD's summary is that: "*a typical 15 yr old in an OECD country could expect to spend about seven additional years in formal education over the next 15 years. Before turning 30, they could expect to hold a job for over five years, be unemployed for nearly one year and be neither in education or seeking work for over a year.*" Even against that prospect, our young people fare poorly. To summarise: "*the data reconfirms that the recent economic crisis hit young, low-educated adults hardest.*"

And on a wider, rather than just UK level, concerns are growing that the gap between the educational haves and have-nots is worsening. Worryingly the Report concludes that: "*The expansion in education has not translated into a more inclusive society.*" This remains the challenge for all.

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