As part of the efforts to dynamise the EU's economies, the Lisbon Council put education higher up the agenda making 'lifelong learning' – including the modernisation of education systems and digital literacy – EU priorities in the years to come. To find out more, Sigma’s GLEN CAMPBELL spoke to MICHAIL SKALIOTIS, head of Eurostat's unit for education, health and other social fields.

LIFELONG LEARNING

for education statistics

‘Lifelong learning’ is today’s umbrella term for EU education – ‘from cradle to grave’ – i.e. all ages – and attempts to cover not only formal education but cultural and societal integration too. The move is towards the learner in the centre for active participation in the labour market and civil society.

Although ‘lifelong learning’ has been discussed for some 30 years, it is only now that the concept has shifted to the policy-making stage. This explains why, up until recently, statistics and indicators on education were only able to rest upon the logistics of the education and training systems and the labour force. The possibilities for tomorrow’s education statistics in the context of lifelong learning abound.

Education data expands

Is education data keeping up with policy developments?

The range of statistics on learning collected at the European level is now very wide growing not only concomitantly with, but also in advance of the EU’s policy interests. We should not forget that only recently, after the Amsterdam Treaty, education policy has become one of the EU’s competencies.

Today’s data cover pre-primary through to tertiary education, extending to areas such as languages, foreign students’ exchange programmes, special needs, teachers, education expenditure and so on. The educational attainment of the population, the social and economic returns, as well as the role of the social and economic background of learning are also covered.

Clearly, the scope of Eurostat data collections and surveys will grow as a result of the EU’s current ambitions in the fields of lifelong learning and digital literacy. Already, the major reference for EU education statistics, ‘Key Data on Education in Europe’, apart from covering other new indicators, now devotes a whole chapter to information and communication technology in education systems.

Michail Skaliotis, from the town of Kalamata in Greece, studied Economics and Business. Completing his MBA in Leuven (Belgium), he passed the Commission’s open competition and has now clocked up 20 years at Eurostat. Working in labour market statistics for a decade, he has become a fervent user of these data working in education and training statistics for the last ten years.
Careful expansion...

In the context of Lisbon and lifelong learning, policymakers have decided on the priority areas of lifelong learning and the indicators have, in fact, been defined.

Now it is necessary to bring the policy needs into operation in terms of indicators, check the availability and validity of data required for these indicators, calculate and test them and only then define some reference levels (benchmarks). But it should be borne in mind that there is a risk of using indicators for benchmarking without going through this process. Therefore, it is paramount that the skills expected from the EU’s education systems be agreed before we use available information and indicators for benchmarking its educational systems.

Education and training accounts

Why did the project on education and training accounts run into difficulties?

We carried out a project on education and training accounts but by the time we could deliver the results, classifications had changed. It remains a priority as it offers a consistent framework facilitating the cross analysis of statistical data on education and training.

In addition, it needs to be updated to take into account changes in the ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) levels and the LFS (Labour Force Survey), UOE (UNESCO, OECD and Eurostat) and VET (Vocational Education and Training) questionnaires as well as the forthcoming results for the second CVTS (Continuing Vocational Training Survey).

Prepared for the test

Will you be able to fulfil Lisbon’s expectations from your current working programme?

We have adapted our work programme accordingly. However, it is more a question of co-ordination of all relevant statistical work with various Directorates-General of the Commission and EU agencies. Our current system will be able to answer the most important actions following Lisbon, but not all; our team is small – outsourcing aside. In terms of quantity, we can meet a certain number – but what we are trying to ensure is that we meet the priorities.

“Lisbon is at the centre of our work”

Of course, there are some areas where we can do better. For example, I believe we could economise on routine standard data collection from administrative sources (like the UOE and VET data collections) and save resources here – contracting out work on an ad hoc basis. This would liberate us for concentrating on tasks linked to the highest priorities, which is providing statistics for the knowledge-based society.

Human capital accounting

The Lisbon Council also refers to investment in human resources, could this become an indicator?

It is something that we should be looking at. The idea is to reach a stage where human capital is treated like any other capital investment. Businesses could produce an annual statement of human resources similar to an accounting balance sheet. Realising that it can affect their market value, some Nordic companies have already started this. Indeed, we have volunteered
to begin a pilot exercise in our unit in which we would like to look at the skills available in the unit, and then compare them to the skills required.

But translating this into a large-scale survey is a heavy operation for which we would need legislation. It is also problematic because it can be regarded as confidential information and even used against companies in terms of take-overs and market competition. However, if we want to anticipate a little in our work – not always running behind policies but in front of them – this is a prime example.

A palette of different surveys

Your data come from a number of surveys. Aren't there disadvantages and advantages in this system?

We use a range of surveys that provide information on the individual or the education and training system. Generally, we have developed a very effective ad hoc approach using modules where we can find a fitting home in existing surveys. The different sources answer different questions, each having its pros and cons.

For the individual, the LFS, the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) and the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) provide fertile ground. On education and training systems we turn to the UOE questionnaire and the initial VET survey, while the CVTS gives us information on enterprises as trainers of their employees.

The LFS is undoubtedly our most frequently used tool. For example, given the limitations of the information obtainable from existing data on transition from school to work, an ad-hoc module of questions within the LFS for 2000 was created. This will collect more detailed data from respondents in or shortly after the ‘transition’. Furthermore, a module on lifelong learning (LLL) will be included in 2003.

Regarding the ECHP, we need to tap the possibilities of this survey much more – despite the apparent weakness of its size compared to the more robust LFS. Since the new ECHP will focus more on living conditions and social exclusion, there is obviously a home here for issues related to education and learning in the information society and in the knowledge economy.

While the advantages are principally choice of sources according to the policy question, the disadvantages should not be forgotten. Not all surveys produce data concomitantly. The degree of coverage diverges – the LFS dwarfs the ECHP. There are different time delays and results – LFS is faster than CVTS for example.

However, in the LFS some information is not always reliable because respondents may answer on behalf of other household members.

The CVTS survey is relatively costly and heavy, posing a burden on enterprises and countries. It is impossible to cover all non-formal education or adult education through the UOE. With VET, it has been impossible until now to assess the employment possibilities opened for VET participants.

The catalogue of shortfalls can be managed acceptably against the advantages this panoply of surveys offers.

Data linkages

Is there a big demand for linking data from employment and education?

This is done already and is a necessity – and we should do more. Within the LFS we have set up an education and training module. These indicators make it possible to analyse better the implementation of employment guidelines, the practice of lifelong training and the integration of young people into the labour market. In relation to the future ECHP, co-operation is underway on the implementation of a new education and training module.

The same goes for the Structure of Earnings Survey (SES), where we have worked bilaterally with the SES team in creating the variable ‘level of education’ to be used in this survey. This will enable linkages to be made between income and educational levels.

And it goes beyond linking employment and education, to also social economic backgrounds and other information not in these surveys – contextual information such as, for example, how the apprenticeship system is organised, in order to understand better
Contextual information, such as, e.g. on the apprenticeship system, is important when analysing statistical data.

The influence of education systems in labour market achievements. If we were looking at education and training outcomes alone, it would be insufficient because it is only part of the fuller story.

We need to look at the contextual variables. On this we work closely together with the Commission’s Directorates-General as well as with EU agencies (CEDEFOP, European Training Foundation) and networks (Eurydice, etc).

If we look at the successful transition of youth, how do we understand when young people have a job? We need to allow for the different countries’ systems. For example, in Germany, apprenticeship is part of the system, so for German apprentices, the transition to work happens immediately. This is why we also have to look afterwards – how long they stay and where their next career move goes.

Surveying adult education

In the context of lifelong learning and in terms of adult education, in particular, how do you foresee the development of a survey here?

The idea would be to have an adult education survey as a chain of inter-related yet independent modules. The whole of the chain could be used if the decision is to field a specific adult education survey at the European level, which would certainly be the ideal solution. However, each of the rings may also be used in different harmonised surveys to cover specific information needs.

Would this not need certain developments on the methodological front?

This certainly requires a lot of methodological work; that is why Eurostat took the initiative for the creation of a task force on measuring lifelong learning in February 2000 which is expected to make its recommendations in January 2001. Different Commission DGs as well as European agencies and networks and international organisations participate in the development work carried out in this context.

Already it has become clear that both time and money need to be invested in the different surveys including the LFS, ECHP, SBS (Structural Business Statistics) and Time Use Survey. Educational activities and content should be covered in the framework of developing information society statistics. Regarding human resource development, investment is necessary here to make it an integral part of business statistics. On the subject of cultural statistics, we are developing these with DG ‘Education and Culture’, UNESCO and the Member States.

We also need a more specific classification of learning activities – in particular, informal ones. This needs to build on the tools already within arm’s reach: the classification of education and training fields, developed jointly between Eurostat, the OECD and UNESCO; the classification of training provisions developed under the statistical strand of the Commission’s Leonardo da Vinci programme for vocational training1; the revision of the classifications of economic activities to extend to educational goods and services; and the development of the education part of a classification for use in time use surveys.

Moreover, on the question of a suitable measurement, if we want to measure the importance people give to learning in their life, time offers a unifying dimension. However, this concerns volume of time spent rather than the quality of learning or something such as ‘quality-time’. This, therefore needs to be addressed further.

Assessing skills and knowledge

Is the assessment of skills and knowledge possible?

It seems that it is. Although the methodology is still under scrutiny, a number of large-scale comparative studies for the direct assessment of skills within the education system are in the process of being developed. To mention one, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), driven by the OECD, assesses some of the knowledge and skills deemed essential for full participation in society by students nearing the end of their compulsory education. Other surveys are in the pipeline too. However, one major snag, with the exception of PISA, is that countries have to ‘buy-in’ and so not all EU countries are covered.

Looking ahead, Skaliotis remarks how much he would like to be a student again; the coming years look good for education in the Union. The role of education surveys will be vital for improving it. Indeed, it will have to be a model student!

1) http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/leonardo/leonardoold/stat/trainingstats/index.htm