

**OSI Education Conference**

*Education and Open Society: A Critical Look at New  
Perspectives and Demands*

**Reflections and Implications for OSI and Partner Networks**

**Summary**

**Hotel Helia, Budapest, June 30 – July 2, 2005**

## **OSI Education Conference: Reflections on the Conference and the Way Ahead**

**Introduction:** The 2005 OSI Education Conference was by invitation only and was held in the Hotel Helia, Budapest, from June 30 until July 2, 2005. All the papers for the conference, including the [invitation letter](#), [agenda](#), [conference program](#), [presentations](#), [list of participants](#), summary report and [evaluation](#) can be found on its web site at:

[http://www.soros.org/initiatives/esp/events/conference\\_20050630](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/esp/events/conference_20050630)

### **Objectives:**

The four objectives of the conference were:

- (i) to discuss education from a number of different perspectives including international trends, the role of civil society, human rights, diversity, the value of social responsibility and regional perceptions of democracy;
- (ii) to consider the implications for the work of OSI and partner education networks, NGOs and civil society in the region;
- (iii) to generate and allow exchange of new ideas within OSI and partner education networks and open new perspectives; and
- (iv) to build on the existing capabilities and expertise of these education networks and generate additional momentum.

### ***Reflections on the conference and the way ahead***

The Conference agenda was designed to allow participants to consider implications of the presentations and discussions for the work of OSI and partner education networks, NGOs and civil society in the region.

At the final session led by Lena Lenskaya, General Education Sub Board Chair, participants were asked to take a little time to consider what were the implications for OSI and partner networks of all that had been discussed at the conference. After this, representatives from the tables gave their input and then Hugh McLean summarized his reflections of the conference, focusing on the implications for OSI and partner education networks and including the responses just offered by the participants, as follows.

#### *1. The changing context for education development:*

The title of the conference "*Education and Open Society: A Critical Look at New Perspectives and Demands*" invited us to think about our identity and priorities as a network. Martin Carnoy ([presentation](#) and [paper](#)) helped to set a context for our work, pointing out the strong connection between globalization, democracy and education and showing us how education sits in the middle of these relationships. He described

the continuum in education: how universities drove much of what happens at the levels below, and how outcomes at these levels accumulate to affect not only higher learning but the whole of a ones life. The changing context included changes in the world of work, the position of women in education, the "class nature" of schools and how the school could become a site of struggle between localized and global identities. He advocated greater flexibility in designing and delivering education for a changing world.

At the opening of the conference Jana Huttova pointed out that Soros foundations and education programs were also transforming and were operating increasingly in new and often more dispersed ways. She asked: "In this new situation, what is it that unites us and what are our shared values?"

## *2. What are our shared values?*

There is an ongoing discussion in our network about what our values actually are, and how these unite us. Why should we have anything in common at all? Why should we continue as a network? We keep hoping for a definitive answer but somehow, with each discussion, it eludes us — like a mirage getting further away the closer we get to it. Abbas Rashid ([presentation](#) and [paper](#)) underlined some ideas we knew and gave us some fresh insights. Firstly, access to *quality education* is a right, and enabling policies do not always exist for this. Secondly, quality education means producing good citizens who appreciate diversity and who are committed to pluralism and open society values.

Abbas spoke of the "structuring of feelings" in a society and how they predetermine social responses within countries to various events. He pointed to the central role of education in structuring social attitudes and feelings. John Abbot ([presentation](#) and [paper](#)) stretched our horizons on what the implications of new understandings of brain development could be for education policy and our work as educators. It is basic to our understanding of education for open society that this education would include values as much as it would include skills and knowledge. Quality education involves all three of these dimensions.

Increased market forces in education, in poorer as well as richer countries, inevitably lead to greater inequality, and therefore represent a threat to real democracy. This can produce an overall decline in quality, which precipitates increased social inequalities both in access to high quality education and in wealth distribution.

An open society education is not one that structures consciousness to serve narrow class, nationalist or religious interests, or one that positions us uncritically in the face of local realities and world events. It is one that creates imperatives and an obligation to change society and the world.

## *3. Is our role as a network to advocate these ideas or simply to facilitate the sharing of different perspectives?*

Some contributors to the discussion at the conference said that the role for an open society network was to facilitate different views and to develop a critique of social processes. But others questioned if can we be mere facilitators of a discussion and just

stop at the critique of social processes. The majority seemed to say that our role was to identify and shape a set of ideas and approaches and then to advocate them vigorously. This is at the heart of our existence as a network, providing the reason for our staying together. Which priorities these ideas should coalesce around and how we should proceed still presents a significant challenge for us. It is this task, nevertheless, that gives us direction and purpose.

#### *4. What is our networks' relationship with mainstream ideas in education reform?*

Iveta Silova ([presentation](#) and [paper](#)) spoke about the education policy reform package that is delivered by major international institutions around the world. This package includes, among other things, testing and the restructuring of exam systems, vouchers for teacher training and school attendance, normative funding, outcomes based education, and reforming administration systems and management. These mainstream reforms are not *automatically* favorable to open society and their effects vary greatly from context to context.

Decentralization is also an important part of this reform package. Yet centralizing information and control over standards most often accompany devolution of costs and responsibilities for education. This centralization of preferred aspects of the education system is part of the logic of decentralization. An open society response to this trend must critically establish an optimum balance in each context: one that ensures the widest possible access to quality education, particularly among minority groups and poorer communities.

How can the levels of standardization we promote in our system, so useful for those who like to compare, allow for an adequate realization of the necessary and important differences between children, communities and localities? What are the implications of standardization for equity and what is its relevance for open society values in education? These particular concerns are not reflected in contemporary monitoring-of-education trends. Our network needs its own strategies to accomplish this. We should not only work energetically for change but also adopt a critical position regarding mainstream education policy ideas, particularly as these are borrowed and adapted to local and national contexts.

#### *5. What is appropriate measurement in education?*

Barry McGaw ([presentation](#) and [paper](#)) provided an excellent state-of-the-art summary of monitoring and measurement in education. He emphasized the need for a greater emphasis on equity and showed how useful it can be to have sufficient data to allow an analysis of equity within countries, not just comparability across countries. Ideally, there should be adequate measures of both quality and equity in education systems. Sample data of various sizes can render relatively efficient insights into equity within education systems.

There is a rapidly expanding 'audit' environment in education measurement that provides comparative data between countries. This is also true of universal exam results and other measures within countries. It is a concern for educators that long-term policy decisions can be based on a reading of rather stark indicators, and are taken most often by non-educators.

How do we develop and popularize measurement and monitoring procedures that reflect the kinds of values that reinforce open societies? And what would the relationship be of these measures to the prevailing contemporary concerns in education policy? These are the questions we face.

*6. What are some possible priorities for the OSI Network?*

Vita Terauda spoke about how the use of coalitions can bring together NGOs with different approaches and persuasions around a common set of priorities. It is clear that our networks are optimally positioned and have the responsibility to make an impact in areas that are of a high priority for open society.

Some of the possible priorities that could focus efforts for our networks include:

- Strengthening local capacity for assessment and critique of policy ideas brought in from other contexts;
- Promoting a more vocal critique of mainstream assumptions and ideas;
- Developing authentic local examples and expressions for human rights and open society values, particularly in countries where "Western" ideas find no echo;
- Collaborating in projects on program content and delivery in certain areas such as civics education, minority education, human rights and education; and
- Promoting the monitoring and measuring of open society values in education.

The central question is whether our networks are just additional shoulders to the wheel of mainstream education reform, or whether we can make a more focused and unique contribution to promote changes that favor open societies. This conference suggests that the future lies in closer collaboration around our key priorities and a clearer definition and more urgent advocacy of our shared values and ideas.

**Conclusion:** Conference evaluation questionnaires were given to all participants at the final session and 66 out of 99 were completed and returned. An [evaluation report](#) was produced and, overall, the feedback was very positive and encouraging. The areas for further reflection by the Planning Committee were clear and the comments given by participants offer some possible approaches to future conferences. These, together with the points made by participants at the final session of the conference, provide a sound basis for the consideration of the implications for the work of ESP and OSI's partner networks.

**ESP Team**  
**July 23, 2005**