

POLICY NOTES

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In this Issue

Across the globe, education is essential to social mobility, bettering the lives of individuals and moving whole nations from poverty to affluence. Yet educational opportunity and the upward mobility it can bring are not equally available to everyone. In rich and poor nations alike, the disadvantaged — defined by gender and geography, race and religion, class and caste — fall behind, losing the chance to improve their lives and depriving society of the contributions they might have made.

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“Optimizing Talent: Closing Educational and Social Mobility Gaps Worldwide”

A Salzburg Global Seminar

From rural China to inner-city Detroit, education is the path to progress, both for individual citizens and for the nations they inhabit. Ensuring equality of educational opportunity, and the improved life chances that education can bring, is a matter of social justice, an aid to political stability and, increasingly, an economic necessity. “Education provides the basis for infrastructure development, adequate sustenance, health care, healthy and sustainable environments, civic and social order and growth, and productive civil and international relations,” ETS Senior Vice President **Michael Nettles** told a recent conference on education and social mobility co-sponsored by ETS and the Salzburg Global Seminar (SGS).

Yet across the globe, both rich and poor nations struggle with stubborn educational and social-mobility gaps that divide members of disadvantaged groups from their more privileged peers. The problem is not uniform: The size of the gaps, the severity of the deprivation, and the identity of the disadvantaged vary from culture to culture. Achievement levels that seem troublingly low in Hong Kong look stratospherically high in Mexico; in the United States, boys' school achievement lags, while, in parts of Africa, many girls never learn to read. In every country, however, closing educational and mobility gaps is a complicated, difficult task for which economic growth is a necessary — but not sufficient — condition. Some programs, from expanded early childhood education to outreach efforts by university admissions officers, show promise, but with many competing priorities clamoring for international attention, advocates need a new way of making the case for change.

That was the message of the ETS/SGS conference “Optimizing Talent: Closing Educational and Social Mobility Gaps Worldwide,” which also was supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education. Held October 3–7, 2010, at Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg, Austria, that houses SGS, the conference brought together 34 researchers, policy advocates and university administrators, citizens of 25 countries on six continents.

Seminar Participants Represented 25 Countries

- Africa
- Australia
- Austria
- Brazil
- Canada
- Chile
- China
- Denmark
- France
- Hong Kong
- India
- Kenya
- Malaysia
- Mexico
- Netherlands
- Philippines
- Portugal
- Russian Federation
- Senegal
- Slovak Republic
- South Africa
- Sweden
- Thailand
- United Kingdom
- United States

In formal presentations, plenary discussions and small-group meetings, participants worked to define the issues that will shape two future ETS/SGS meetings: a conference on education through the age of 18, planned for December 2011, and a conference on higher education, planned for the fall of 2012. The partnership with SGS is a global extension of ETS's seven-year series of “Addressing Achievement Gaps” symposia — 14 conferences, to date, that have examined educational gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged groups in the United States.

The upcoming ETS/SGS conferences are expected to produce a set of policy recommendations and to establish a worldwide network of advocates committed to closing educational and social-mobility gaps — an urgent task, participants in the recent conference agreed.

“The existing gaps in access to education reinforce social and economic injustices — locally, nationally and globally. The new knowledge society clearly privileges those who are living in countries which have rich educational resources and a good public infrastructure to optimize their talents. Others fall behind, more and more rapidly.”

— Jochen Fried

“The existing gaps in access to education reinforce social and economic injustices — locally, nationally and globally,” said **Jochen Fried**, SGS Director of Education. “The new knowledge society clearly privileges those who are living in countries which have rich educational resources and a good public infrastructure to optimize their talents. Others fall behind, more and more rapidly.”

One country, different worlds

In Brazil, test scores in the southeast top those in the northeast. In Nigeria, wealthy city children spend 10 years in school, while poor rural girls from the Hausa ethnic group average less than six months. In the United States, Hispanics and African Americans graduate from high school at far lower rates than their White and Asian peers. Around the world, in countries rich and poor, conference speakers said, some groups succeed educationally — attending school, earning high grades and test scores, completing college degrees — while others struggle, for a complex mix of historical, cultural and economic reasons. In China, educational opportunities vary so much from region to region that “it’s not one country,” said conference speaker **He Jin**, Senior Program Officer in the Ford Foundation’s Beijing office. “It’s a country of four different worlds.”

“Many parents in Africa are illiterate. The difference of schooling between parents may explain the difference of schooling of the children.”

— *Mamadou Ndoye*

But the near-universality of educational gaps masks profound global diversity, conference speakers noted. Each society defines its disadvantaged groups differently — by geography, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, class, religion or language. Groups that succeed in one country may stumble in another: In the United States, high school and college graduation rates for girls top those for boys, but across Africa and the Middle East, girls lag far behind. Immigrants do well in Canada, but struggle in Europe. Minority-group members often languish, but not always: The Japanese flourish in Hong Kong, and the Christians succeed in India. “It’s not minority per se,” said conference speaker **Narayana Jayaram**, professor of research methodology at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai. “What position minorities have taken in relation to modern education is what is important.”

From country to country, the size of the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups varies greatly. In Yemen, boys enroll in secondary school at a rate 20 percentage points higher than girls, said conference speaker **May Rihani**, an executive of the nonprofit Academy for Educational Development, but that gender gap is only two percentage points in Mauritania. On the oft-cited Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an exam gauging academic performance in industrialized countries, nearly 30 percent of Brazil’s students — but almost none of Finland’s — perform at the lowest levels. In Hong Kong, ethnic minorities do less well than their native-born peers, but for Mexico, “the achievement of some of the lower-achieving students in Hong Kong will be a target not easy to reach,” said conference speaker **Felipe Martínez Rizo**, an education professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes. “It’s a much less important problem than we have, with half of our students in very low levels.”

The social-mobility arms race

Over the past decades, access to all levels of education has expanded rapidly in countries from Chile to China, but even as students flood into schools and universities, educational gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged groups persist stubbornly, conference speakers said. In 13 Latin American countries, higher education enrollment has grown by as much as 500 percent in 30 years — but in every country, roughly 40 percentage points separate the college-going rates of the richest and poorest 20 percent of the population, said conference speaker **Raul Atria**, a sociology professor at the University of Chile. Between 1994 and 2009, every social group in Britain increased its university attendance rate, but higher social groups outperformed lower ones by almost exactly the same amount each year, said conference speaker **Lee Elliot Major**, research and policy director at the nonprofit Sutton Trust in the United Kingdom.

Major calls this phenomenon the “social-mobility arms race” — the mechanism by which social stratification reinforces and perpetuates itself, as more affluent, better-educated parents ensure that their children make the most of available educational opportunities, while poorer, less-educated families lag behind. Across the globe, conference speakers said, the power of family background asserts itself repeatedly. In the United States, students whose parents finished college score higher on math tests, making it more likely that they, too, will earn degrees, said conference speaker **Sharif Shakrani**, an education professor at Michigan State University. The story is the same at the other end of the spectrum. “Many parents in Africa are illiterate,” said conference speaker **Mamadou Ndoye**, the former executive secretary of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa, who served as an education minister in Senegal in the 1990s. “The difference of schooling between parents may explain the difference of schooling of the children.”

In theory, schooling can level the playing field for children from disadvantaged families. Indeed, the relative narrowness of Canada’s educational gaps — more than half its lowest-income students go on to higher education, compared with only 32 percent in the United States — may be attributable to the greater equity it offers younger students, said conference speaker **Alex Usher**, who heads the consulting firm

Higher Education Strategy Associates. “We don’t have the extremes of urban poverty that Americans do,” Usher said. “We have generally fairer distribution of educational resources at primary and secondary. We’re closer to equality in terms of how we spend in poor districts and rich districts. That matters, I think.”

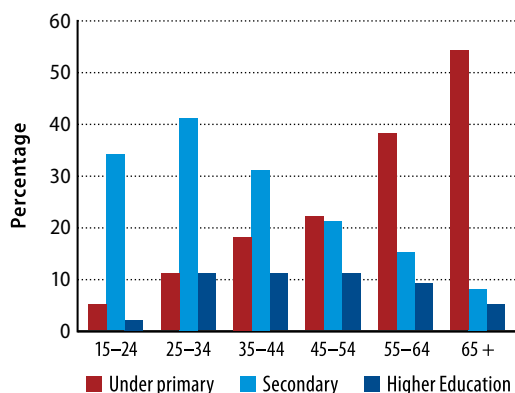
“If you are an underachieving child in an underachieving school, your frame of reference is other underachieving children probably being taught poorly. As you don’t see any better students, and you don’t see any better teaching, that’s schooling for you. There are no challenges to improve and excel.”

— *Dennis M. McInerney*

In practice, however, in many countries, the children who most need an extra educational boost are the least likely to get it, conference speakers said. Lower-quality schooling then helps perpetuate inequality rather than combating it. In Brazil, wealthier regions have better schools, said conference speaker **Simon Schwartzman**, President of the Institute for Studies on Labor and Society in Rio de Janeiro, and school achievement correlates strongly with socioeconomic status. Because educational access has expanded so rapidly in the past 50 years, many of the country’s schoolchildren have parents with little education themselves. Perhaps as a result, public opinion surveys find that people are happy with the schools, Schwartzman said, although Brazil’s students perform poorly on international exams, even in comparison with other Latin American countries.

“If you are an underachieving child in an underachieving school, your frame of reference is other underachieving children probably being taught poorly,” said speaker **Dennis M. McInerney**, a professor and administrator at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. “As you don’t see any better students, and you don’t see any better teaching, that’s schooling for you. There are no challenges to improve and excel.”

Figure 1:
Education Levels of Brazilian Population, by Age



Source: Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics, National Household Survey, 2008.

Equalizing the quality of the education provided to rich and poor becomes more difficult when free public schooling loses ground to a fee-charging private sector, conference speakers said. In Latin America, at every educational level, from primary schools to universities, the quality of public offerings is declining and private alternatives are gaining momentum, said Chilean sociologist Atria. In Russia, most students now have access to some kind of education, including higher education, said conference speaker **Anna Smolentseva**, a Moscow State University sociologist, but access to high-quality education requires money. "Governmental funding is not sufficient," Smolentseva said. "Thus, education becomes largely dependent upon family, becoming not a public but a private good."

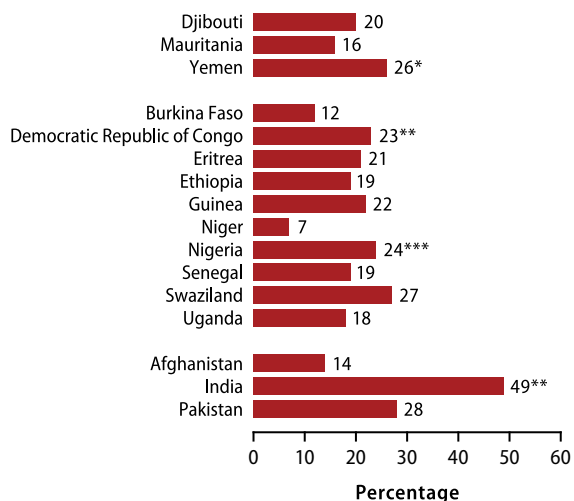
Girl power

Powerful social forces sustain educational inequities, but closing those gaps can reap big dividends, both for individuals and for countries, conference speakers said. Expanding educational opportunities for girls packs a particular punch, reverberating through society with a powerful multiplier effect that brings improvements in children's health, family income and social welfare, speakers said. Education gives girls the self-confidence to refuse risky sex and makes them less likely to become victims of domestic violence. Educated girls have fewer babies, and those babies are less likely to die — an additional year of education for girls reduces the infant mortality rate by 5 to 10 percent, said Rihani of the Academy for Educational Development, because educated girls marry later, when their bodies are better able to withstand pregnancy and childbirth. Their children stay healthier, because educated mothers are better able to follow doctors' instructions. And educated women are more likely to work outside the home, reaping disproportionate gains for their families, since women reinvest 90 percent of their earnings in their households, while men reinvest only 30 to 40 percent, said conference speaker **Mary Ann Danowitz**, Austrian Science Foundation Lise Meitner Senior Research Fellow, Vienna University

of Economics and Business Administration. "There are so many benefits to girls' education that are not just returns for her but returns for the family and the society," Rihani said. "That social benefit does not come out of the boys' education." Indeed, World Bank research in 42 countries found that secondary education for girls brought a 10 to 20 percent return on investment, Rihani said, compared with a 5 to 15 percent return for boys' education.

But the biggest payoffs come only when girls are able to complete secondary education — not if they stop after four to six years of primary education, Rihani said. "With secondary education, young adolescent girls can become agents of change for the society," she said. "If the girl is able to move through the secondary school, she will be able to go to the parents and say, 'I do not want to be married,' and convince them why not. She cannot do that before completing secondary." For many girls, however, the transition from primary school to secondary school is what Rihani calls "a broken bridge" — in Pakistan, for instance, every girl enrolls in primary school, but only 30 percent continue on to the secondary level.

Figure 2:
Girls' Net Enrollment Ratio in Secondary Education



* Data are for school year ending in 2005.
** Gross enrollment ratio (net not available).
*** Data are for school year ending in 2006.

Source: UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report, Paris, France, UNESCO Publishing, 2010.

Indeed, across the world, such educational transition points often become choke points for less-advantaged groups, conference speakers said. More than a million South African students begin their educations, but only 100,000 graduate ready to go to university, said conference speaker **Loyiso Nongxa**, Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand. Most European undergraduates are female, but as students progress up the academic ladder, the proportion of women shrinks; only 18 percent of university full professors are women, said Danowitz of Vienna University. “At every point where there’s a transition, there is a barrier for many individuals,” she said. “And those barriers tend to have a more profound and detrimental effect for girls and women and for low-income students.”

Educational mobility, social immobility

For both individuals and countries, closing educational gaps can pay off in the most concrete of ways — in the pocketbook. In the United States, where earning power is closely tied to educational attainment, research suggests that a 25 percent decrease in the big-city high school dropout rate would increase earnings by \$4.1 billion, boost spending by \$2.8 billion and create 30,000 new jobs, said Shakrani of Michigan State. That link between educational achievement and economic firepower holds internationally, as well: the countries with the highest PISA scores over the past 40 or 50 years also registered the biggest economic gains, said Major of Britain’s Sutton Trust. For his own country, the conclusion is obvious, Major said: “If you narrow the cognitive gap in the UK, then you will see economic growth.”

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— *Mary Ann Danowitz*

Still, the relationship among economic growth, educational achievement and social mobility can be more complicated than such research findings suggest, conference speakers said. Economic growth is a necessary but insufficient condition of educational progress, said Ndoye, the former Senegalese education minister. “Without economic growth, it will be very difficult to have progress in education, and I think that Africa is facing this challenge,” he said. “But I want to underscore the necessity to have a commitment from the state. It is a matter of economics, but also a matter of strategic decisions and policy reforms.”

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Just as, for a nation, economic growth brings educational gains only when political conditions are right, so too, for individuals, educational achievements translate into upward social mobility only when economic conditions are right. “Between 1998 and 2009, enrollment in higher education in China grew from less than 7 million to about 23 million, but since 2005, about one-third of college graduates have not been able to find jobs upon graduation,” said the Ford Foundation’s He.

Latin America, where college-educated people in some countries recently had higher rates of unemployment than their less-educated peers, may be experiencing “educational mobility with social immobility,” said Chilean sociologist Atria. His point is made clear in Table 1. Only in the cases of Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica and Uruguay does the rate of unemployment decrease as the level of education increases, as would be expected.

Table 1:
Average Unemployment Rate During 2000–2004,
by Educational Level, for Latin American Countries
(Percentage of the Labor Force)

	Educational Level		
	Primary	Secondary	Higher
Argentina	42.8	38.5	17.7
Bolivia	60.2	32.5	4.4
Brazil	N/A	N/A	N/A
Chile	18.5	59.0	21.8
Columbia	26.9	52.9	16.5
Curacao	62.2	24.1	9.9
Dominican Republic	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ecuador	28.8	47.7	21.9
Mexico	13.7	30.1	46.4
Panama	35.9	37.3	26.0
Peru	9.4	61.4	28.6
Uruguay	54.8	31.3	13.9
Venezuela	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: CINDA, Interuniversity Center for Development, “La educación superior en Iberoamérica, Informe 2007,” www.cinda.cl, Table D3. Original source is World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2006. Note that the data for Mexico are preliminary.

In today’s Middle East, college graduates take an average of five years to find a job, said conference speaker **Zoubir Yazid**, Managing Director of ETS Global. “They still haven’t been able to produce higher education that really answers the needs of the private sector,” Yazid said. “People tend to think that the expansion of education in these countries will resolve everything. But if your economic growth has not continued, you have a problem.”

Even a growing economy, like that of the United States, will only absorb workers with the right kind of education, noted conference participant **James Applegate**, Vice President for Program Development at the Lumina Foundation for Education. “In an economic downturn like this, we hear the stories about college graduates

that can’t get jobs, and they’re taxi drivers,” Applegate said. “But overall we’re seeing, actually, a need for an increase in the number of people with these higher levels of education. We’ve just got to align higher education programs better, so we’re truly meeting the workforce and economic development needs of our country.”

Redistributing social capital

Although conference participants agreed that closing educational gaps — and ensuring that such gap-closing brings upward social mobility along with it — is crucial to the global future, how best to accomplish these tasks is not always obvious. Since the nature of educational and mobility gaps differs from country to country, the optimal gap-closing strategy may differ as well, speakers suggested, and every policy choice requires balancing three sometimes complementary, sometimes competing educational priorities: expanding access, ensuring equity and pursuing excellence.

“People tend to think that the expansion of education in these countries will resolve everything. But if your economic growth has not continued, you have a problem.”

— Zoubir Yazid

The careful analysis and long-term planning that effective education reform requires is not always easy for countries to implement, especially when short-term problems clamor for attention, said conference speaker **Birger Fredriksen**, a former World Bank official who was responsible for education aid to Africa. “It is politically difficult to give priority to issues that will only give returns in the long term if you are in a country with very few resources and you have teachers knocking on the door that need to have their salary paid,” he said. “In most poor countries, the largest share of education

funding comes from domestic resources; therefore, Fredriksen said, international development aid must be allocated efficiently, to make sure it adds to, rather than substitutes for, domestic spending. And that aid must be deployed strategically, he said, to fund educational investments that countries themselves are unable or unwilling to make — investments in capacity-building, in capital projects or in programs serving groups with little political clout. Too often, however, donors pay little attention to the best way to deploy their contributions,” Fredriksen said, failing to ask “how we can use that aid to help the country better use its own resources?”

As they try to close educational and mobility gaps, countries must decide what level of educational attainment to focus on, said Danowitz of Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration. In developing countries, research suggests, getting half the population through secondary school is the best route to economic growth, she said, while preparing students for higher education is key in the post-industrial world. Countries also may have to choose which end of the performance spectrum to focus on. Pushing to improve the achievement of low-performing groups may sometimes grow an economy more slowly than directing limited resources to a talented elite who can kick-start development, speculated Usher, the Canadian consultant. Nor is it clear how best to help talented students. “When you have identified these kids in communities where the school system is dysfunctional, what do you do with them?” asked Nongxa, the South African university vice chancellor. “Do you remove them from their community and place them in well-performing schools?”

Countries also must analyze the causes of their educational gaps to determine optimal solutions. In Canada, data suggest that low-income students fall off the educational track less because they lack the money to continue than because they lack the social and cultural capital that middle-class students take for granted, Usher said. “This isn’t as easy as just writing a

check,” he said. “For low-income kids, very often, getting them into university is about one person putting an arm around one child at exactly the right time. And that’s difficult to do as a government policy.”

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— Alex Usher

Around the world, consensus is growing that redistributing social and cultural capital to the disadvantaged requires beginning long before the traditional start of compulsory schooling, conference speakers said. “If we want to revamp the education system only in the university level, it is like revamping a building starting at the 12th floor,” said Mexican education professor Martínez Rizo. “Successful programs for improving the achievement of schoolchildren start very early. At 3 years, it may be too late.” Yet too few children have access even to kindergarten programs, speakers noted. In China, parents line up for days trying to get their children into the best kindergartens, hoping to smooth their entry into top-quality “key schools” later on, said He of the Ford Foundation. The best kindergartens serve only 10 percent of the country’s young children, and less than 40 percent can attend any program at all. In Russia, said sociologist Smolentseva, the government closed kindergartens during the demographic bust of the 1990s; now that birth rates have rebounded, 1.7 million children are awaiting slots.

Governments and school systems are implementing other programs that show promise as gap-closers, speakers said. In Malaysia, Chinese and Thai children spend an extra year in primary school mastering the language they will have to know to succeed later on, said conference

speaker **Anthony Jackson**, Vice President for Education at the Asia Society. Most Indian states offer free school lunches to ensure that poor students will attend and provide hostels for girls attending school away from home, said Mumbai professor Jayaram. Singapore, whose schools consistently rank near the top of international comparisons, ensures high-quality instruction by reserving teaching careers for the best 30 percent of its students, financing their training, and letting them spend a large fraction of their first year on the job in classroom observation, Jackson said. “We have the knowledge of how to systematically create a highly effective teaching corps,” he said, “so we don’t have to start from scratch.”

Starting on the 12th floor

Universities also have a role to play in closing educational and mobility gaps, but to play that role most effectively, they must reach beyond their traditional constituency of middle-class teenagers, conference speakers said. Some universities are already doing so, said conference speaker **Mee Foong Lee**, Executive Secretary of the nongovernmental European Access Network, based at Roehampton University in London: The University of Liverpool in Britain sows the seeds of future diversity by working to raise the educational aspirations of disadvantaged 9- and 10-year-olds, and the Free University in Amsterdam offers a preparatory year of Dutch-language instruction to refugees, asylum seekers and international students. Effective outreach also requires more flexible admissions procedures, Lee said — a sensitive issue, since enhanced flexibility is sometimes taken to mean lowered standards. Instead, she argued, such flexibility is best understood as a way of recognizing potential. “It’s like going into a deep diamond mine,” Lee said. “We need to find rough diamonds. We get them, we polish them, we let them shine. It’s the same principle.”

Table 2:
Access and Widening Participation in Europe and Africa

Main Drivers in Europe	Main Drivers in Africa
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aging population • Changing demography • Economic slowdown • Competitiveness of emerging economies • Role of universities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low participation rate in higher education • Economic and political advancement of nation • Millennium Development Goals • Role of universities

Source: Mee Foong Lee

In the United States, getting nontraditional students into higher education is crucial both for individuals and for the national economy, said Applegate, of the Lumina Foundation. By 2018, 60 percent of U.S. jobs will require a postsecondary credential, and fewer than 40 percent of U.S. adults now hold such a degree, Applegate said. “By 2018, and certainly by 2025, if you do not have a post-high school degree or credential, you will very likely be working poor,” Applegate said. But in most American states, even if every baby born in the next 15 years grew up to graduate from college, there would not be enough workers to fill all the jobs requiring higher education. Institutions must also reach out to adults who lack the time for traditional schooling, easing their path to a degree by speeding up coursework and offering academic credit for on-the-job learning.

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— James Applegate

Still, universities vary in their commitment to expanding access, conference speakers said. In one recent survey of European universities, 97 percent recognized the

importance of widening participation in higher education, said conference speaker **Hanne Smidt**, Senior Advisor at the European University Association, but fewer than half believed they needed to do more themselves. Perhaps as a result, European universities have a mixed record of helping disadvantaged groups, Smidt said: While 78 percent have policies in place to aid the disabled, as required by European legislation, only 24 percent are reaching out to immigrants. Europe needs a far more differentiated higher education system with an equivalent of the U.S. community college sector, argued conference speaker **Eduardo Marçal Grilo**, a trustee of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and a former minister of education in Portugal. Without such institutions, he said, “many of the access problems will remain, because the structure is not well-adapted to absorb students from different backgrounds.”

“The only way to fight against European decline is to train all the people that are in Europe — immigrants, disabled, older people. All of us need the best training, and universities in that respect have an enormous role to play.”

— Eduardo Marçal Grilo

The Bologna Process, an 11-year effort to streamline and standardize higher education in Europe, has had mixed results, conference speakers said. Imperatives to cooperation are not hard to come by: With its population aging, Europe needs a productive workforce to sustain its welfare state. “The only way to fight against European decline is to train all the people that are in Europe — immigrants, disabled, older people,” Grilo said. “All of us need the best training, and universities in that respect have an enormous role to play.” Nevertheless, parochial interests block internationalization of the university system, said conference speaker **Georg Winckler**, Rector of the University of Vienna. “Nation states, the member states, don’t want the European institutions to interfere too much with educational issues,” Winckler said.

Setting the global agenda

The world has no shortage of problems competing for international attention. Floods and earthquakes ravage poor countries; children die of preventable diseases; glaciers melt and sea levels rise. Amid the clamor, no strong international voice speaks for education, conference participants agreed. Although education is a key issue for many nations, no international institution effectively monitors the uses of development aid, ensuring that money goes where it can be most effective in enhancing education outcomes. Donor nations and agencies make aid decisions in response to complex political and bureaucratic influences; sometimes historical, often colonial, ties between donors and recipients determine which countries receive help. With no one monitoring whether these individual aid decisions make sense in the aggregate, the result is inexplicable inequities and omissions, said Fredriksen, the former World Bank official. In sub-Saharan Africa, some countries get less than \$5 per child in education aid, while others get more than \$50. Although half the adult women in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are illiterate, donors have provided little support for programs aimed at people who missed out on primary education — even though educating women reaps huge dividends for individuals and societies. “Why is so little attention given by the international aid community to this very important developmental and human rights problem? There’s very little aid for that,” Fredriksen said. “The point is that there’s nobody who looks at this global distribution of aid.”

International agencies, hamstrung by their member nations’ competing agendas, cannot fill the gap, said conference participant **Edward Mortimer**, SGS Senior Vice President and a former aide to the United Nations Secretary General. “The capacity of the bureaucracy to change and improve itself is limited by the extreme narrow-mindedness of the national governments that actually make the decisions,” Mortimer said. “They are not really interested in global public goods. They are interested in scoring points and advancing what they perceive as their national interests on a particular global chessboard.”

In that context, the upcoming program of ETS/SGS education conferences must be “a will-building effort” designed to galvanize change, said conference participant **Theresita V. Atienza**, a professor at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. In their small-group meetings, conference participants floated a wide variety of ideas for organizing and publicizing the SGS/ETS gatherings. One group conceptualized the complex interrelationship among the issues as a DNA-like double helix; others proposed focusing on the importance of teacher quality, or structuring the conferences around the problem of ensuring smooth transitions from one level of education to another. Some suggested featuring star speakers, such as former U.S. President Bill Clinton or Microsoft® founder and philanthropist Bill Gates, to give the conferences cachet; others stressed the importance of inviting a mix of researchers, policymakers, practitioners and funders.

“We have to demonstrate the impact of education on the economy, on security, on life chances for young people.”

— Birger Fredriksen

Although closing global educational and social-mobility gaps is a matter of justice, advocates must learn to make pragmatic arguments, not just philosophical ones, conference speakers agreed. “For those of us who are involved in this, it’s really urgent that we try to find some way of explaining better,” said Fredriksen, who grew up in a remote Norwegian fishing village in the 1950s, dropped out of school, and returned to finish only when the fishing became poor. Defining education as a fundamental human right “is a good thing, but it’s not enough anymore,” he said. “We have to demonstrate the impact of education on the economy, on security, on life chances for young people.”

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In this Issue

(continued from page 1)

Even in countries where access to education is expanding rapidly, these gaps persist, as social stratification perpetuates itself across generations and schooling too often fails to make up for family disadvantage.

Because every culture is different, the contours of the problem vary from place to place; what counts as failure in one country may look enviable somewhere else. Everywhere, however, eliminating educational and social-mobility gaps is a complicated endeavor that demands concerted effort from politicians and bureaucrats, teachers and university administrators, employers and policy advocates. Although economic growth is a prerequisite of gap-closing, growth alone cannot accomplish the task. It takes an effort of will to enact and implement the policies that can make a difference: training effective teachers, extending schooling to the youngest children, ensuring that all students complete their educations and coordinating university training with the demands of the labor market. With a host of compelling issues crowding the international agenda, advocates need to deploy new kinds of arguments as they strive to convince funders and policymakers of the urgency of this work.

The complex intertwining of educational opportunity and social mobility was the focus of “Optimizing Talent: Closing Educational and Social Mobility Gaps Worldwide,” a conference co-sponsored by ETS and the Salzburg Global Seminar (SGS) and supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education. The conference, held October 3–7, 2010, in Salzburg, Austria, brought together 34 researchers, policy advocates and university administrators from around the world and set them to work defining the issues that will structure two future ETS/SGS conferences on global education issues.



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Twenty-one of the seminar participants gave formal presentations, and introductory remarks were offered by **James Applegate**, Senior Vice President of the Lumina Foundation; **Jochen Fried**, SGS Director of Education; **Edward Mortimer**, SGS Chief Program Officer; and ETS Senior Vice President **Michael Nettles**. ETS Senior Research Associate **Karen Prager** and **Anna Glass**, Program Specialist at UNESCO's Division for Higher Education served as rapporteurs, and small-group discussions were moderated by ETS Senior Research Scientist **Catherine Millett**; **Gerben van Lent**, Executive Director of Knowledge Management and Governance for ETS Global; and educational consultant **Jacqueline Woods**.

More information about the conference, including PowerPoint presentations, is available at http://www.salzburgglobal.org/2009/sessions.cfm?nav=lectures&IDSPECIAL_EVENT=2540.