THE WORLDWIDE EDUCATING FOR THE FUTURE INDEX 2018 ECONOMY SNAPSHOT

United States:
Risking the future

A decentralised model leads to wide variation in education quality—and a poor result for one of the richest countries on earth

The US is an education enigma. It boasts some of the world’s highest-quality universities. It spends more than most wealthy nations on educating its young people, when considering both government and private funding. Yet US results in international maths, science and reading tests are regularly below those of many other high-income economies. It also underperforms most of its rich-world peers in its capacity to provide future-oriented skills to young people: the US ranks 18th in the 2018 Worldwide Educating For the Future Index, developed by The Economist Intelligence Unit and commissioned by the Yidan Prize Foundation, below its 12th-place ranking in the last iteration of the index—a more or less stagnant performance, relative to the overall pool of economies. Considering that it has the third-highest GDP per head among index economies, its rank continues to represent a significant under-achievement.

1 The US is home to 15 of the 20 highest-ranked universities in World University Rankings 2018, The Times Higher Education
2 In 2015 the US spent US$16,518 per student enrolled in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Within the OECD only Luxembourg reported a higher figure. See Education at a Glance 2018, OECD
3 Louis Serino, “What international test scores reveal about American education”, Brookings Institution, April 7th 2017
4 Unless indicated otherwise, this and other qualitative assessments about US capacity to provide training in future skills are based mainly on research conducted by EIU analysts as part of index development
5 Texas schoolbooks, for example, have received criticism in recent years. See Rebecca Klein, “Texas Textbook Battle Heats Up With Claims Of Conservative Bias”, Huffington Post, September 11th 2014

Policy: national weakness, variable state and local progress

America’s weaknesses in future-skills education show up most prominently in strategy formulation and implementation. To some extent, these are a reflection of the country’s vast size and the relatively decentralised nature of education, in which state and local education systems pursue their own, often distinct strategies. “There is not currently, nor is there likely to be, a centralised mechanism for how to teach these skills,” says Elizabeth Mann Levesque, a fellow at the Brookings Institution’s Brown Center on Education Policy.

Consequently, the current national education strategy provides little guidance to educators on delivering future-oriented skills in areas such as leadership, creativity, collaboration or communication. Nor do national curriculum guidelines for upper-secondary schools prioritise methods such as problem-based learning.

Figure I. America not first
The US, ranks and scores (out of 100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy environment</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching environment</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic environment</td>
<td>13</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit
and inter-ethnic issues, interpretations of historical events, and other areas relevant to building civic awareness.5

Ms Levesque believes there is a positive side to decentralisation in that it allows for a considerable degree of local innovation. Indeed, some state and local school systems are moving ahead with future-skills training despite the absence of federal direction. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a not-for-profit organisation, lists among its “exemplars” 14 school districts in California, Wisconsin, New York and other states that, among other attributes, emphasise problem-based learning in curriculum and teaching approaches.6 The decentralised nature of education, however, makes it difficult to share information about innovative strategies being pursued at local levels. It also makes it difficult for such strategies to be scaled up across school districts and states.

Ms Levesque identifies joint initiatives pursued by states and non-governmental organisations to encourage a standardised approach to upgrading curriculum and teaching practices in areas that include 21st-century skills. One is the C3 Framework,7 which highlights the skills that students should be developing in civics courses. One of the framework’s main objectives is to help students “build critical thinking, problem solving and participatory skills to become engaged citizens”.8
Teaching environment: a mixed picture

Inconsistency of approach similarly impacts assessments of teacher education and qualifications. For example, although national standards for upper-secondary teachers are consistent across schools, enforcement of standards is left to individual states and is sometimes patchy. In-service training is also mandatory for upper-secondary teachers across the US, but not all state-level programmes include training in the teaching of future skills.

The US presents a stronger picture in other areas of the teaching environment. One is the level of collaboration between universities and businesses: the US ties for fourth in the indicator looking at co-authored university-industry research publications. Research and development are a major focus of such partnerships, but collaboration also extends to curriculum development. Ms Levesque notes that school-employer partnerships are similarly being formed at local levels, which can allow for dialogue about how to teach 21st-century skills. “Employers can help educators and students understand what career pathways are available and what skills are required.”

Another strength is regularly updated information available to educators and administrators on education outcomes and employment opportunities. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics, for example, makes freely available a detailed trove of employment data, including earnings broken down by different levels of educational attainment. Such data help schools provide relevant career guidance to students, although policy support for career counselling varies across states and localities.

Melting-pot positives

The US puts its best foot forward in its relatively open socio-economic environment. American universities remain a magnet for overseas students from around the world, although international enrolments have been on the decline of late. And despite highly adversarial public discourse about immigration in recent years, American attitudes toward immigrants and diversity more broadly remain positive. For example, a 2017 poll found that 81% of American respondents believe their city or area to be a good place to live for immigrants. In a similar poll, 77% said that their city or area is a good place for members of sexual minority groups (see figure III).

There are, however, threats to young people’s ability to interact with global peers in addressing cross-border challenges. Chief among these is the monolingualism prevalent among students. While the upper-secondary curriculum in almost all index economies requires the study of at least one foreign language, no national requirement exists in the US. According to the Pew Research Center, no more than 20% of primary- and secondary-level students in the US study a foreign language, compared with an EU average of 92%. This situation is not likely to improve anytime soon: Ms Levesque does not currently anticipate movement at either federal or state level to push requirements for more foreign-language learning in schools.

11 Elizabeth Redden, “International Student Numbers Decline”, Inside Higher Ed, January 22nd 2018
12 Gallup World Poll, 2017
13 Kat Devlin, "Most European students are learning a foreign language in school while Americans lag", Pew Research Center, August 6th 2018