

THEME 03

# Different cultures, same demand for future skills

EDUCATION

GLOBALIZATION

FUTURE SKILLS

In the history of mass systems of education, there has always been a profound relationship between a culture and the sort of knowledge and skills that were passed on to its next generations. Each culture has always reflected its own values and ideals through education. However, as globalization is moving forward, the knowledge and skills that are required become less related to specific cultures and more alike in each community. Global demands might not be equally compatible with all cultural legacies in different educational systems, making it more challenging for some to include them.

## Our observations

- In [Embedding Technopolis](#), philosopher Haroon Sheikh provides a historical overview of the rise of mass education in countries such as Germany, the U.S. and the Netherlands, illustrating how local traditions and ideals have resulted in different approaches to education and the ideals and values that are passed on to new generations.
- Educational systems greatly [vary per country](#), reflecting their economic and cultural context.
- The *Economist Intelligence Unit's* (EIU) white paper *Worldwide Educating for the Future Index: A benchmark for the skills of tomorrow* [concludes](#) that economies with liberal social traditions are most likely to inculcate an independent mindset and help young people think critically about a fast-changing world. Finland, New Zealand and the UK occupy the top three in this domain. They claim that [open societies](#) are more successful in preparing their young for the challenges of the future, and more closed societies are at risk of lagging behind when it comes to preparing for the [future of work](#).
- In order to incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into its curriculum, China is [trying to move away](#) from its traditional teaching practices, which heavily emphasize rote memorization and obedience, towards a curriculum that incorporates inquiry methods, classroom discussion, applications of knowledge, and use of technology.



## Connecting the dots

As we noted earlier, skills such as critical thinking, creativity and cultural awareness are currently **considered** vital for the future of work on a global scale. This implies that, in order for countries to prepare next generations for future challenges, these skills need to be included in educational practices around the world. However, educational systems differ greatly per culture, reflecting cultural heritage in teaching methods, such as the nature of the relationship between students and teachers, the way knowledge is to be mastered or the attitude towards what is considered common knowledge. Considering that education and culture are tightly linked, adapting future skills might be easier for some cultures than others.

In China, for example, the legacy of philosopher Confucius has a profound influence on Chinese culture and he is seen as *Wanshishibiao*, teacher of all teachers. The recitation of Confucian classics was therefore highly valued in Chinese education. As a result, rote-learning, a memorization technique based on repetition, became a traditional method of teaching and learning. Another concept that is traditionally highly valued in Chinese education is authority. Children were expected to comply with the requirements of adults without question. In classrooms, this resulted in an emphasis on lectures and demonstrations, rather than learning through classroom discussions. Children were not encouraged to speak their mind or practice independent thinking. In some respects, these methods appeared to be successful. The math scores of Chinese children, for example, **proved** to be amongst the **highest** many times internationally. However, in the EIU index 2017, education in China was

ranked poorly on the extent to which educational systems inculcate future skills. This is not surprising, considering that critical thinking, for example, requires competences such as autonomous thinking and reflective reasoning. Creative thinking, to give another example, requires questioning what is traditionally considered evident and normal. Neither of these skills seem compatible with the Chinese tradition of obedience and repetition.

Educational systems that carry values and ideals from the West often include a (partly) child-centered learning method that is based on pedagogical works of pedagogues John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. This method aims for autonomy and independence. The voice of the student is considered important and pupils are encouraged to adopt an active attitude in their education. Individual differences between students are acknowledged and considered valuable. Classroom discussions are a common method to encourage children to think for themselves and student input is greatly appreciated. These methods might be more compatible with the competences needed for future skills such as critical thinking and creativity.

Future skills are based on the expected changes caused by the **Fourth Industrial Revolution**. An important change that is already unfolding globally is that companies have to deal with an immense amount of rapidly changing information on a daily basis. The ability to sift through it and pull out what is relevant is a challenge that requires future skills. In order to stay in the game, cultures are pressured to adapt in ways that might not be compatible with their traditions and values.

## Implications

- Teaching future skills in cultures that are traditionally not compatible with the competences and attitudes that are required for such skills, can cause a rift between generations. In that case, the young are no longer educated in accordance with their cultural heritage. When, for example, Chinese children are encouraged to actively participate in classrooms and are no longer obliged to do exactly as they have been told, a long tradition of obedience is abandoned.
- Emphasizing reasoning skills is **paramount** in future skills. Applying reasoning skills to common knowledge in education could cause a more prominent role in one's thinking for reasoning all together. This could affect one's disposition with respect to how to appreciate values, customs and traditions. Values that do not stand the test of reasoning might increasingly be challenged, and values that do stand the test of reasoning might increasingly be favored. This could concern rather innocent ideas. However, more serious ideas that are not the product of reasoning but merely of certain beliefs, traditions or cultural legacy might also be challenged when reasoning becomes a more dominant voice.
- The debate on future skills seems to imply a shift in education from a knowledge-based approach towards educating for skills. However, there is a strong **claim** that skills can only be taught when one has knowledge to apply them to: how can you practice questioning what is considered evident if you do not have profound knowledge of what has been traditionally considered evident? It is therefore likely that passing on knowledge stays important and will provide cultures the opportunity to pass on their local traditions and ideals.