

Monitoring the quality of education



"The quest for quality education is today inextricably bound up with the processes and impact of globalization."

UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy 2002-2007.

As the economies of nations compete for strong positions within a competitive global market place, many governments have become increasingly inclined to view the relative performance of their education systems as a key element in strategies designed to achieve improvements in national economic development. This trend, coupled with the enormous expenditures that are devoted to education, has precipitated demands by governments and the public for higher levels of scrutiny and accountability concerning the quality of education. Educational planners can only address these demands if they are able to employ modern research methodologies to monitor the general conditions of schooling and the educational achievements of students.

Mechanisms for monitoring the quality of education systems have already been set in place by most developed countries. Many of these have been implemented under the auspices of international organizations such as the *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* and the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD).

In recent years, a number of developing countries have also shown interest in establishing monitoring mechanisms as part of an overall strategy for making informed decisions about planning the quality of education. One of the best-known initiatives in this area has been the educational policy research and training programmes conducted by the fifteen coun-

tries involved in the *Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality* (SACMEQ).

Experience gathered in this field by the IIEP during the 1990s has shown that there are two essential pre-conditions required for ministries of education to establish successful mechanisms for monitoring the quality of education. First, there is **a need to base such mechanisms on the highest possible technical standards** for the collection, management, and analysis of data – so that only valid data enter the decision-making process. Second, there is **a need to ensure that such mechanisms are both designed and operated within an enabling environment of productive two-way dialogue** between information providers (educational planners) and information users (decision-makers operating at all levels of an education system) – so that valid data focussed on key policy concerns can be transformed into useful information for planning purposes.

These requirements, taken together, suggest that many ministries of education will require a new generation of educational planners as they face the major task of planning the quality of education during the third millennium. In particular, the educational planners of tomorrow will need to consolidate and extend their role as technically-able research managers, and, at the same time, develop new skills that will enable them to operate as innovative and insightful 'information brokers'.

The notion of educational planners acting as 'information brokers' is important because it implies much more than the capacity to match information requests with data. Instead, the expectation will be that educational planners are able to work with (and not simply for) decision-makers.

This re-positioning of the educational planners' work will bring them 'closer to the action' and require them to pro-actively anticipate information needs and opportunities, to identify and interpret major trends, to synthesize issues and themes from large bodies of research in a manner that can be acted upon, to explore and apply a broad spectrum of data analysis techniques that will convey 'the meaning behind the data', and to access, evaluate, and use the vast knowledge of resources that have emerged with the Internet.

The preparation of a new generation of educational planners with these kinds of enhanced skills will take a number of years and will need to draw upon innovative research materials and a variety of creative training techniques. During its *Seventh Medium-Term Plan – 2002-2007*, the IIEP will join forces with ministries of education to address these important challenges along three main dimensions.

- the expansion of research programmes focussed on applying the most modern computer-based research methodologies to the task of monitoring the quality of education;
- the development of new training programmes aimed at providing educational planners with the skills required to act as information brokers; and
- the exploration of avenues for establishing consortia of ministries of education, with the mission of increasing the capacity of educational planners to monitor the quality of education by working together, and learning from each other.

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