

**UNESCO GLOBAL EDUCATION DIGEST 2004**  
**Comparing Education Statistics across the world**  
 (condensed from the report of the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Montreal)

The last decade has witnessed substantial growth in educational participation across the globe, particularly in Africa and South America. Nevertheless, inequities persist. Although a child today can expect to receive 9.3 years of schooling at primary and secondary level, there is considerable variation across the world. A child of school entrance age in Finland, New Zealand or Norway can expect to receive over 17 years of education, almost double that in Bangladesh or Myanmar and four times as much as that in Niger or Burkina Faso.

Moreover, in 35 countries, over 10% pupils are repeating grades, thus using up already scarce resources. Expected years of schooling are closely related to a country's national income and inequalities occur, not just between different countries, but also within a country.

One of the key global educational goals for governments to reach is *universal primary education* (UPE) or primary education for all by 2015. Primary education principally aims to equip individuals with basic literacy and numeracy skills and a curriculum of five or six years is generally regarded as sufficient to achieve this. However, it is also essential for many countries to develop educational systems beyond this. Sustainable development is unlikely to be achieved unless there are adequate learning opportunities at secondary level with higher-level skills and higher rates of return to both the individual and society. Expanding educational opportunities can lead to income growth, skilled labour pools, expanding choices and increasingly relevant skills. A recent study of long-term growth in middle-income countries showed that those with a more developed secondary and tertiary system of education experience a more rapid growth (*UNESCO Institute for Statistics/OECD, 2003*). It is also interesting to note that no country has reached UPE without at least 35% secondary net enrolment (*Clemens, 2004*).

**School Life Expectancy**

Participation in schooling is typically represented by an enrolment rate and an indicator used which combines enrolment rates in primary, secondary and tertiary education to give the number of years of schooling that, on average, individuals can receive. The lowest school life expectancy in the world of just over two years for the 2001/2002 school year is for Afghanistan.

It is interesting to note that in high-performing countries such as Canada, USA, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, and Spain, more than 2.5 years of an average school career is due to participation in tertiary education while in Africa the amount of time spend in tertiary education remains marginal.

**TABLE 1: Average school life expectancy in years by region, 2001**

Region	Primary – Secondary	Primary – Tertiary
Africa	7.6	7.8
North America	11.2	14.3
Asia	8.9	9.9
Europe	12.4	15.4
Oceania	12.4	M
World	9.3	10.8

*Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Table 4*

Almost every high-income country achieves 11 years of education but only two low-income ones do – Malawi and Uganda. Among low-income countries, the average duration of schooling is less than seven years for 21 out of 37 countries. There is little doubt that national wealth partly determines levels of investment in human capital but it does not completely account for the current school life expectancy. Several other variables enter the equation. It may take years, if not decades, before the youth educated today contribute fully to the prosperity of their country (*Hanushek, 2002*), so comparing current education indicators with national income does not directly show the return on investments in education though it can shed light on how countries

differ in terms of investing their available resources.

### **Changes in School Participation**

The period from 1990 – 2001 witnessed substantial growth in participation in education. Participation increased in primary and secondary education in every region of the world but the greatest increase took place in Africa and South America where the median school life expectancy rose by 1.5 years. Moreover, the average duration of schooling increased by over two years in at least 11 African countries.

A number of countries show dramatic growth in this period, including Ethiopia, Mali, Morocco and Rwanda (over two years), Benin and Guinea (over three years) and Malawi and Uganda (over four years). In contrast, however, some countries showed little or no change – Burundi, the Central African Republic, Ghana and Kenya – while some countries actually fell below their 1990 levels. Children in Zambia and Zimbabwe could expect one year less in 2001 than in 1990, while in the Congo, school life expectancy dropped by over four years during this period.

Between 1998 and 2001, most countries experienced growth at both primary (up to a 45% increase) and secondary level (up to a 60% increase). Lower rates of change at the primary level were often related to larger absolute change in the number of students. Increases in primary enrolment typically occurred in tandem with increases in secondary enrolment and this held true for countries with low levels of primary enrolment as well as for those nearing UPE. Meeting demand for primary education can spur greater demand for schooling at secondary level. The costs of expanding educational opportunity go beyond meeting UPE goals and imply the creation of additional opportunities at secondary level.

### **Repetition and school life expectancy**

School life expectancy overstates educational outcomes by including grade repetition. It captures the volume rather than the distribution of school years so it is important to assess indicators that measure the efficiency of a school system, in

particular, the number of years accrued through the repetition of grades.

In 70 out of 147 countries for which data was available, the proportion of repeaters did not exceed 5% at either primary or secondary level while in 23 out of 161 countries for which data was available at primary level, repetition did not exist and the same was the case with 24 out of 158 countries at secondary level where policies of automatic promotion did not allow grade repetition. For those countries with small or moderate overall repetition levels, the proportions tended to be slightly higher for secondary students.

In 35 countries, more than one in ten pupils currently enrolled in primary education is repeating a grade. In Gabon, Madagascar and Rwanda, one in three students at primary level was a repeater. Children in at least 23 countries can expect to spend more than one year of their education repeating a grade.

Even low levels of grade repetition can cumulate to a substantial number of years over the course of both primary and secondary cycles. For example, with 9% of secondary pupils repeating a grade in France, an average of 0.7 years is devoted to grade repetition. This is equivalent to more than one in two children repeating a year as they pass through the secondary education cycle.

The cost of repetition is substantial. A recent study estimates that among 15 countries in Latin America, representing over 90% of repetition in the region, the total resources needed is equivalent to US\$ PPP 11.1 billion a year (*Bruneforth, Motivans and Zhang, 2004*). The majority of these costs, over US\$ PPP 8.3 billion, are faced by Brazil, but the share of costs attributed to repetition is also high in Argentina and Mexico. In Brazil, the cost is equal to providing one year of school for almost 10 million secondary students or 2 million university students.

**Universal Primary Education and beyond: how long do all children stay in school?**

High enrolment rates do not ensure completion of universal primary education. Countries may share a similar average school life expectancy, yet in one almost all children stay in school for the full duration while in another some children stay much longer in school than the normal duration while others drop out early. In assessing how many years of schooling governments provide, on average, to each child, it is also important to address the issue of whether *all* children stay in school for a common duration.

In some countries, a small proportion of children benefit from a long education while in other countries, enrolment is more equitably distributed among children. In Swaziland and Oman, for example, children stay in school for an average of 9 to 10 years. However, this level of expected years of schooling is achieved with near universal (85%) enrolment in only two years of the official school-age population in Swaziland and never in Oman. Compared to these two countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia and Vanuatu have a similar number of expected school years but succeed in keeping age-specific enrolment rates above 85% for 6 to 8 years of the school-age population. Thus, in some countries a small proportion of children benefit from a long education while in others, participation in enrolment is more equitably distributed among children.

Assuring universal primary education remains a priority, but meeting further learning needs of young people is also high on the agenda. There is strong evidence that UPE and attainment of secondary education brings a range of social and economic benefits to individuals and societies. Access to basic education is critical for the elimination of extreme poverty and is a fundamental human right. With these issues in mind, national governments have committed themselves to achieving the six *Education for All* goals and the education-related Millennium Development Goals as adopted by the United Nations.

Compulsory education is generally recognized as the first major step towards this. This means that constitutional or legislative law requires children within a

certain age range to be enrolled in school. It is regarded as an obligation primarily of the State itself and is best achieved by making education available, ensuring it is of a high quality to attract learners and committing sufficient funds from the state's budget.

In India, for example, the 93<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill seeks to make free and compulsory education a fundamental right for children in the 6 – 14 age group. In Greece, primary and lower secondary education are compulsory provided a pupil is not more than 16 years of age. Kenya's draft constitution guarantees education as a basic human right. It also introduced the Children's Act in 2001, which guarantees free and compulsory education. Other African countries with explicit legislation on education as a basic right include Algeria, Cameroon, Liberia, Libya, Mali and South Africa.

Yet there remain a number of countries that do not have any regulations related to compulsory schooling, countries such as Bahrain, Cambodia, Gambia, Malaysia, Oman, Singapore and the Solomon Islands.

Four in five countries worldwide have regulations that define compulsory education as extending beyond primary schooling. Typically, lower secondary education is part of compulsory education in three-quarters of countries and in others, it includes some or all of upper secondary education. In Africa, in 20 out of 49 countries and in Asia in 13 out of 45, compulsory education is represented by the primary cycle.

Given that secondary education has become more generally accepted as a minimum standard for educational participation, do governments meet their own standards? At least half of all countries do not! This is reflected by enrolment rates at the end of compulsory education that fall below 90%. There are 11 countries where only one in two children are enrolled near the end of compulsory schooling.

### **Monitoring the goal of UPE**

School life expectancy does not indicate the extent to which children attend and other indicators such as intake rates, primary net

enrolment and completion rates help evaluate how well education systems manage to achieve this goal. Of the 155 countries reporting data for 2001, 37 still showed apparent intake ratios below 95%, indicating that at least 1 in 20 children never start school. Since the apparent intake ratios typically overstate the proportion of a cohort that enters school, the real number of non-starters will be even higher. In seven countries, all in Africa, ratios fell below 66%, implying that one in three children do not enter school.

The fact that children start primary education, however, does not automatically ensure that they will receive a full cycle of primary education. Drop-out rates can be high, especially in developing countries. Of 170 countries reporting data, one in seven have a primary net enrolment rate of less than 70% and more than a quarter have net enrolment rates between 70 and 90%.

There are eight countries where less than half of the children at the officially defined school age are enrolled in primary education. All are in Africa and seven of them are countries with the lowest level of national income.

#### **Participation in secondary education**

One aspect of participation and progression in education is reflected by the size of the cohort, which moves from primary to lower secondary education. Transition rates show the percentage of children leaving the last grade in primary education to continue their studies at lower secondary level. In the vast majority of countries, almost all students who leave primary education continue their studies at lower secondary level. In Europe, all countries except Ireland and Malta report transition rates above 94%. However, just a quarter of African countries reach transition rates similar to those reached by three quarters of the countries in the rest of the world. In one in four African countries, half the children who reach the last grade of primary education do not continue to secondary level and in another quarter of countries, at least one in three students drops out before secondary school.

In short, the chance that a child leaving the end of primary education continues to

secondary schooling is more than 80% in almost all countries in the world. The dramatic exception is found in African countries where two-thirds of the countries fall below this level.

The high rates of transition from primary to lower secondary education in most countries signify that the end of primary education cannot be considered the typical exit point from the schooling system. In fact, in most countries, those pupils who do not continue after primary school are at much greater risk of social exclusion later in life. Efforts to ensure an adequate education for all children must therefore consider lower secondary education.

Africa is the only region worldwide where the completion of primary education marks a typical exit point and it usually coincides with the end of nationally defined compulsory education. In all other regions, half report gross enrolment rates above 90%. A few countries, which have high overall levels of participation, report gross enrolment ratios below 50%. These include Afghanistan (13%), Cambodia (33%), Myanmar (42%), Pakistan (35%) and Guatemala (44%).

Between lower and upper secondary levels, enrolment ratios drop drastically in all regions. The only exception is Europe where ratios remain high. In some countries, enrolment ratios fall sharply. In Albania, Algeria, China, Malaysia, the Maldives, Mexico and Sri Lanka the gross enrolment ratio drops from 90% or higher at the lower secondary level to less than 50% at upper secondary.

There are relatively few opportunities for secondary education in Africa and there are also striking differences in terms of who has access. A child's family background or socio-economic status is clearly associated with their chances of participating in secondary education. Young people from poor families may not attend due to cost barriers (tuition), opportunity costs or distance from the nearest secondary school. In Swaziland, for example, 78% young people from the top fifth of households in terms of wealth have some secondary schooling compared to 33% from the poorest households. In Senegal, the country

with the lowest overall rates of participation, secondary schooling rates for youths from better-off families are 25 times higher than those among youths from poorer ones.

### **Meeting gender-related education goals**

Gender parity and equality in access to education is an important component of the international goals. The first time-bound international goal requires that gender parity in terms of access to education should be met by 2005 (UNESCO, 2003). The reality is that more than one in three children live in countries without equal access to primary education for boys and girls.

60% of all children live in countries that have a gender parity index for primary gross enrolment ratios of 0.95 to 1.05. In other words, more than one in three primary school-aged children live in countries that fail to ensure equal access to primary education. It is remarkable that in all of the countries without gender parity, it is girls who are disadvantaged.

Gender disparity is also more widespread at secondary level. Every second child lives in a country without equal access to lower secondary education and four in five children live where there is no parity at upper secondary level. The magnitude of inequity increases by educational level. At primary level, only 7.5% children live in countries where gross enrolment ratios of girls do not even reach 75% of the value for boys but the figure becomes 25% for lower secondary and even more for upper.

Disadvantages for girls in secondary education are common in low-income countries but in richer countries, girls tend to outnumber boys in secondary education.

### **Learning outcomes and international benchmarks**

It is insufficient to rely on administrative data alone to examine the quality and effectiveness of educational systems. Indicators based on aggregated administrative data typically provide information on inputs to the educational system, such as the number of students, teachers and the levels of financial resources invested. These are often used as indirect measures or proxies of education

quality or outcomes. However, it is important to examine direct measures of educational quality, especially in terms of learning outcomes, as the ultimate goal of providing access to education is for children to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the future.

First we see that attending school in itself does not translate into mastery of academic competencies. In Korea, low performers make up 5% of the entire 15-year-old population, in Finland 7% and in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru, they are as many as 40% or more.

Then there are those 15 year olds who have either dropped out or have never attended school and may not have had the chance to acquire needed skills. The proportion of youths ranges from around 20% in Argentina, Brazil and Peru to over 40% in Albania, Indonesia and Mexico. Even in Korea and Hong Kong, 15% and 12% respectively are not in school.

This overview underscores the strategic importance of secondary education and emphasizes the need to monitor the development of secondary schooling as part of a wider assessment of global progress towards education for all. This importance is reflected by the policy intentions of governments themselves. In a majority of countries worldwide, compulsory education standards include at least some secondary education and it is the most common exit point, although in more developed countries the standard continues to move upwards towards higher levels of education.

In terms of national standards and actual levels of participation in secondary education, the African countries lag further behind. The underdevelopment of secondary schooling is a cause for concern for many reasons, as the expansion of secondary education has important implications for building skills and human capital and underpinning growth and sustainable development. However, it should also be considered a potential obstacle towards meeting the goal of universal primary education.

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