

AVIS DU HAUT CONSEIL DE L'ÉVALUATION DE L'ÉCOLE

INTERNATIONAL INDICATOR SYSTEMS IN EDUCATION

France's Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de l'école (High Council for the Evaluation of Education) has deemed it necessary to evaluate how the French educational system and, more broadly speaking, French society, uses in international comparison surveys. For this reason, after giving consideration, in its Opinion No. 16,¹ to international surveys focusing on student achievement, the High Council looked at international indicator systems in education, designed to compare the human and material resources, organisation and working of educational systems. As it did for the surveys comparing student achievement, it looked not only at the indicators' design and meaning, but also at France's participation in devising them and its attitude with respect to them.

To bear out the discussions that led to the drafting of this first opinion, the High Council asked Jean-Richard Cytermann, associate professor at France's Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and Marc Demeuse, professor at the Institut d'Administration Scolaire at the Psychology and Educational Sciences Department of the University of Mons-Hainaut (Belgium), to present it with a report. The said report – which, like all reports commissioned by the High Council, does not necessarily reflect its opinion, but rather contains the analyses and suggestions of the report's authors – is public and may be read on the High Council's site: <http://cisad.adc.education.fr/hcee> under the «Publications» section.

The publication of international indicators on education has been developed considerably by a number of international authorities over the past few decades.

The issue of comparing the features of education systems and, more importantly, weighing the results against the factors likely to explain performance levels is nothing new. Starting from the very end of the 1950s, the researchers who were about to create the IEA were already looking at the issue, in connection with their efforts to organise and develop international evaluation of student achievement².

As was the case with the international comparative surveys of student achievement, the said concerns, above all scientific, were gradually carried forth, over the course of the 1980s, through requests on the part of political and administrative heads of education systems, who were developing evaluation systems in their countries and wished to have references for comparison.

Those requests led the international institutions – of the greatest interest to us here are the OECD, then the European Union – to strive to define educational indicators capable of being used for comparison

1. Opinion No. 16, Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de l'école, *France and International Evaluation of Student Achievement*, May 2005, France.

2. See Opinion No. 16. The IEA, *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement*, was founded in 1961.

from one country to another, and gathering from each country the data needed to calculate and publish them. The system is now fully operational and recurring, in that each year, countries comparable to ours provide, using a single questionnaire, the data necessary to set up the databases that will allow the OECD, European Union and UNESCO to produce their educational indicators ³.

While all of the indicators produced by the above institutions have always been intended, first and foremost, to form the foundation for thinking and action on the part of political leaders, and research data for researchers, some of them take on a more binding dimension for European Union countries, against the background of the Lisbon Process and the open cooperation method determined by the European Council in March 2000, in that they must help buttress «*significant comparisons between European countries on the basis of benchmarks, according to jointly-determined objectives*».

France participated very extensively in creating the international indicator systems, but uses them only to a modest extent.

In its opinion on «*France and International Evaluation of Student Achievement*», the High Council expressed heartfelt regret that our country participated too little in developing international surveys on student achievement and has not invested enough in the field of edometrics. The same cannot be said here, and France – highly skilled in the field of statistics and equipped with an excellent information system on education – has played and continues to play an important part in designing and developing international indicator systems on education.

It did so through the Evaluation and Forecasting Directorate (DEP), which concurrently created and developed a national indicator system on the education system. That system gave rise to the regular publication of *The State of Education*, the first edition of which came out in 1991, making it coincide with the OECD's first *Education at a glance*.

The State of Education, which is very widely circulated and rightfully recognised as cogent and of high quality, gives significant focus to international comparisons, integrating the international indicators designed by the OECD and the European Union. This can explain why in France's the impact of the publications of such institutions is generally less than in countries that have chosen to publish a «national interpretation» of the international indicators, in particular those of the OECD ⁴. Moreover, it can be noted that the media only devote real attention to the said indicators when they offer a «scoop», something infrequent in the field of education.

That being said, international indicators are quite frequently cited by policymakers, and some of them have become important in debate on education,

such as the average expenditure per student or the percentage of young people exiting the educational system with a higher education diploma. However, it is more often to justify a decision or claim than to enlighten political decision-making by putting the French educational system in perspective that the indicators are used. The distance that French policymakers have kept with respect to the indicators applies both to national indicators and those offered by international comparisons; it is probably due in part to cautiousness with regard to evaluation-based approaches over which the High Council has already expressed regret on a number of occasions, but also real issues in using and interpreting some of them.

Technical and format-related questions that can raise political issues.

Designing and presenting international indicators is not an easy task: they must not only be meaningful in political terms, in other words, provide information on factors that can be used to describe and govern educational systems, but also be based on sources and calculation methods that are homogeneous enough from one country to the next so that the comparison can be valid, and stable enough that trends can be assessed in a valid manner.

While real progress has been accomplished following the efforts deployed by the countries involved and international institutions, the target is still far from being attained and the objective questions that always arise when designing indicators take on a more acute dimension from the technical standpoint and can have particularly high political stakes, when taken in the context of international comparisons.

This is also the case of problems already difficult to handle clearly and comprehensibly by all parties involved in a national setting, such as dividing costs in tertiary education between teaching and research, objectively assessing instructors' total work time when their required hours are defined only in terms of time spent teaching the students, or, to bring up once again an issue to which the High Council has already called attention, the definition of a young person completing initial training without having reached a level of qualification deemed sufficient.

♦ The definitions and sources on which international indicators are based are not always uniform, often remain unclear and are not always published. In that respect, the international nomenclature on teaching levels and degree programmes⁵ was a form of progress. However, when it comes to ranking the training programmes offered in each country within that

³. These are published by the OECD in *Education at a glance*, the European Union (Eurydice) in *Key Data on Education in Europe*, and UNESCO's Statistics Institute, in its.

⁴. This is true, for instance, of Belgium, whether in the French community, or the Flemish community.

⁵. SCED, the International Standard Classification of Education

single framework, the countries are left to decide whether they will do so, are not expected to comply with an international standard when they do so, and certainly do not adopt a uniform approach. It should be added that, as far as France is concerned, the classification system is not frequently used to present national indicators and that the ranking of French secondary school programmes in the international nomenclature has every reason to be challenged⁶.

- ◆ Depending on the definitions and conventions used, indicators that are similar in name and political purpose will have a different value depending on the organisation calculating them: this is true of a vital indicator, the one used to determine how many students exit the system without a diploma – the figure can be 20% or 16%, depending on the type of indicator used. The differences can be fully legitimate, but then need to be justified and clarified from a political and technical standpoint;

- ◆ The merit-worthy desire to improve the technical quality and political relevance of published indicators has led to changes in definition and indicator format from one year to the next, making it difficult to compare them over time and preventing the elaboration of time series;

- ◆ The political meaning of certain indicators and the significance of what they measure can be interpreted wrongly, when indicators that actually assess different phenomena are presented as being very similar to one another: this is true, for example, of «class size», on the one hand, and «number of students per teacher», on the other;

- ◆ Some indicators have every reason to be challenged: this is true when it is implied that a significant index on education expenditure would be «contractual average salary per hour of teaching time», determined by comparing the theoretical salary at mid-career (which can be very different from the average salary paid to the teachers, considering their age and actual service time) with the average number of hours spent teaching before the students (which is only a part – differing from country to country – of their actual workload);

- ◆ The same is true when calculating how many students have reached the end of a given training programme – in some cases, the figure used refers to the number of students who have earned a diploma, while in others, all of the students registered for the training programme and having attended until the completion point are counted.

Indicator format is, in and of itself, a political stance that influences how the data are approached and interpreted: the OECD's *Education at a glance* presents the indicators in increasing or decreasing order between the countries, inciting the reader, along with the comments made, to compare data indicator by indicator, while the European Union's *Key Data on Education* consistently show the indicators in

alphabetical order, by country, and arrange a large number of background facts around them, inciting the reader to give much more consideration to the features and background of each educational system when comparing.

Better connect the various indicator production systems, fine-tune their interpretation more and make them «talk politics».

The High Council notes that significant progress is underway, both at the national and international levels to improve indicator quality and clarify their objectives and limits.

Those efforts must, obviously, continue and give rise to the production and circulation of methodological booklets on the design process and sources from which each indicator arose. Each of the points mentioned above needs to be viewed as another area for improvement. However, that improvement alone will not be enough.

- ◆ It needs to be combined with careful efforts to connect the increasing number of indicator systems in the field of education, for which the political stakes are ever-higher, both at the international level, especially as concerns the European Union's open cooperation programme, and at the national level, with the definition of annual performance project indicators that are to accompany the Finance Budget programmes. It is important that indicators that appear to provide the same information not be the same in the systems set forth by different institutions. It is vital that the much-needed variety in indicator types not lead to confusion;

- ◆ Entire sections of educational systems are currently very poorly described by international indicators, as is the case with lifelong training. Essential data – often discussed very ideologically in international debates on education – are poorly assessed and compared, such as the degree of decentralisation or delegation existent in an educational system and the levels at which decision-making occurs, as well as, in the field of educational expenditure, household and enterprise expenditure and, more broadly speaking, expenditure other than that of the public sector.

- ◆ It is essential to aim further than simply improving the technical quality of indicators; they need to be, more and more frequently, combined with considerations that enlighten educational policy decisions and be put into perspective with one another. An indicator that does not appear to be developing in the right direction immediately can prove dangerous, and it is vital that educational decision-makers

6. Technological baccalaureates are included in the classification, along with general baccalaureates, as training programmes leading to long tertiary education programmes, while vocational baccalaureates are considered a training programme that leads to short tertiary education programmes. If strictly applied, the ISCED nomenclature would make it appear that France offers a less favourable outlook, compared to other countries, as regards educational opportunities upon completion of secondary schooling.

and players be given the resources to correctly assess the ramifications of such developments;

♦ This assumes that studies will be developed – both at the Ministry of National Education, particularly at DEP, and in the educational research community – such that the indicators can be placed in a conceptual setting that is meaningful to decision-makers. It is not enough, for instance, to appraise classroom size and teacher salaries; it is also necessary to be able to connect, with regard to the objectives of the educational systems, the respective developments of each indicator. International studies on these topics need to be based on research at the national level, making it possible to take into account the background against which each education system develops;

♦ Indicator format and circulation remain to be improved, in particular with regard to teachers, who sometimes refuse them outright, as they have done with other approaches to evaluation, claiming that neither the quality or outcomes of education can ever be measured. They also need to be improved with regard to decision-makers, who must not give in to the temptation of using indicators only when they can support or illustrate their decisions, but

must agree to use them as tools for evaluating their own policies.



Today, it is inconceivable to evaluate and govern educational systems without looking at the international perspective. Like comparative surveys on student achievement, international indicator systems make it possible to raise questions, but cannot, in and of themselves, provide answers to the issues that educational systems can encounter. It is important to be aware that the compromise between a uniform, and thus simplified, description of education systems that can be highly diverse, and the desire not to distort the portrayal of those same diverse situations is a difficult one to achieve. Hence the importance, in order to prevent any form of ambiguity and remedy the risk of faulty interpretation, of making perfectly clear the political concepts that underlie the indicators and sources that feed into them, and develop the research required to interpret them.

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