



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Meeting the Quality Challenge in EFA-FTI Countries

Background Paper prepared by UNESCO for the
Fast Track Initiative Technical Meeting
Tokyo, Japan
22 April, 2008

Introduction

1. Improving the quality of education for all learners everywhere is a key priority if we are to reach the goals of Education for All. Without quality, access to and equity in education cannot be fully achieved or sustained. Although huge gains have been made in the numbers of children enrolled in school, there is growing recognition that *quality is the main determining factor* in whether learners stay in school and succeed in learning. The decline in student performance on international and regional student assessments of learning outcomes in many countries has also drawn increased attention to the quality issue.¹ Further, the evidence points to growing inequalities between the average scores of learners from economically privileged backgrounds and those of learners living in poorer areas. The situation is exacerbated in EFA-Fast Track Initiative countries, where emphasis on the rapid expansion of access has led to teacher shortages, overly crowded classrooms, shortage of teaching and learning materials, and overall deterioration in learning environments.

2. The purpose of this paper is to present relevant background on definitions of quality education and ways of assessing quality to help guide the discussions on improving EFA-FTI country endorsement processes. It is also intended to launch discussions resulting in concrete recommendations for capacity building in currently endorsed countries to strengthen national efforts to meet the quality challenge.

Defining the Goal: Multiple Perspectives on Quality Education

3. Viewed from the global perspective, there is a vast body of literature that addresses the concept of quality education, with definitions adjusted to different purposes, contexts and stakeholders. While rights-based definitions tend to focus on the safety, well-being and personal growth of the learner, more development oriented concepts and capability theories stress the importance of achieving cognitive skills and generic competencies. Some also identify certain attributes that quality education should have in all societies, such as *responsiveness* to the needs of learners and *relevance* to their physical and cultural environments.

4. The EFA definition of quality education was clearly laid out in Jomtien (1990) as one that provides learners with basic learning tools² and basic learning content³ required by all human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to live together in peace, to make informed decisions and to continue learning. The framework for understanding and achieving quality education established four dimensions in which it occurs and can be measured: (1) learner characteristics (2) learning processes (3) content, and (4) systems. Further, reference to attaining quality education for all learners is

¹ EFA Global Monitoring Report: *Education for All by 2015: Will We Make It?*, p. 67.

² Such as literacy, numeracy oral expression and problem solving

³ Including knowledge, values, skills and attitudes

made in several of its twelve strategies for achieving EFA goals, and explicitly in strategies which spell out specific lines of action to improve learning environments, learning processes, learning resources, teachers and learners' capabilities

5. The UNESCO concept of quality⁴ has continued to evolve as one that is holistic, dynamic and multi-dimensional. The 2005 EFA Global Monitoring Report underscores this point by noting that the framers of the Jomtien Declaration and the Dakar Framework for Action intended much more than “the expansion of existing formal school systems to economic growth through the spread of basic cognitive skills --- it also implies reflection on the nature and purpose of education in each society, given that it stressed basing education on the actual needs of children, youth and adults, especially the excluded, as well as promoting culture and empowering citizens.”⁵ This comprehensive and inclusive view is reflected in the dimensions of education quality identified by UNICEF (2000) and UNESCO (Pigozzi 2004), both of which directly address the fundamental goal of education articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).⁶ In this approach, the right of every individual to a quality education can only be assured when its components are understood from the perspective of the learners themselves⁷ and take into account their individual characteristics, capabilities and goals.

6. Because approaches to defining quality are anchored in different theories of learning, its role in society, and the capability of education systems to fulfil that role, education for all has frequently been referred to as the most elusive of the six Dakar goals. International concepts for reforming classroom teaching and learning practices have proven difficult and “not easily amenable to global policy prescriptions.” It is therefore essential for local and national visions of quality to be articulated as platforms to guide needs-based, appropriate and sustainable interventions at the level of learning, the level of the school and the level of the system.⁸ Based on a review of experiences in seven ‘ambitious’ countries⁹ deemed to have made significant progress toward the quality goal, the 2005 GMR observes that “successful qualitative reforms require a very strong leading role by government and a robust long-term vision for education.”¹⁰ Viewed from local perspectives, concepts of quality reflect a society’s unique cultural values,

⁴ As reported in the 2005 GMR: *The Quality Imperative*, this concept is based on references to the quality grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other legal frameworks as well as the Delors Report, a Ministerial Roundtable on Quality held in 2003 as a side event of the 32nd General Conference, and the IBE/ICE Conference on Quality Education (2004).

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Article 29 1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) “The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.”

⁷ For a detailed description of these levels and the elements within each, see Pigozzi, “What is the ‘quality of education?’ (a UNESCO perspective). In *Cross-national studies of the quality of education: planning their design and managing their impact*. Eds. Ross and Genevois, 2004.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Egypt, Senegal, South Africa, Sri Lanka

¹⁰ EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005: *The Quality Imperative*, p. 56

educational priorities and aspirations. At the level of the school or learning environment, there is nothing abstract about the term. When asked about the quality of their education, children are quick to respond in very concrete terms. When parents perceive the quality of education as high, they are likely to send their children to school and keep them there. Similarly, adult learners are not likely to complete a programme unless they feel that what they are learning is relevant and useful.

7. Whatever their intended scope and application, definitions of quality education should not be viewed as either prescriptive or static. As societies evolve, so do notions of how education can best adapt to unprecedented new challenges and needs. International dialogue on quality education has led to general agreement that the concept will continue to evolve as education systems transform in response to these needs and to their commitment to fulfil the right of a quality education to all. As part of the process, old perceptions of quality education as a commodity only available to a privileged elite are vanishing along with corporal punishment, gender bias and segregated schools. In their place, visions of quality based on the rights and individual capabilities of all learners are gaining momentum and authority. However, in much of the world, the gap between vision and practice has yet to be crossed.

8. In 2003, the UNESCO Ministerial Round Table on Quality Education issued a communiqué noting that “Quality has become a dynamic concept that has constantly to adapt to a world whose societies are undergoing profound social and economic transformation.”¹¹ While the ministers acknowledged that there is no single definition that can cover the present and future educational goals of all societies, there are common elements which should equip all people to fully participate in their own communities and also become citizens of the world. To this end, “quality education requires us to redefine the parameters of education in such a way as to cover certain basic knowledge, values, competencies and behaviours that are specifically attuned to globalization but reflect the beauty and richness of our diversity expressed in different forms of belief, spirituality, culture and language.”¹²

Discussion Questions:

In view of different perspectives on defining quality education described above,

- *Should a comprehensive definition of quality education and strategies for implementing it be part of a country’s national education plan?*
- *How can countries be assisted in undertaking more school and community based research on quality-related issues in order to develop better policies for enhancing quality learning process and outcomes?*
- *How can FTI partners help countries build their capacities identify reliable indicators for measuring the quality of learning processes and outcomes?*

¹¹ Communiqué, Ministerial Round Table on Quality Education (UNESCO Headquarters, 3-4 October 2003)

¹² Ibid

How will we know when we get there?

9. Today, at the halfway point toward meeting our collective commitment to EFA by 2015, the quality of education is perceived as a central concern in virtually all countries, largely because both national and international assessments of learning outcomes continue to reveal alarmingly weak and uneven levels of achievement in many countries worldwide. While these assessments are “incomplete proxies of what and how much students actually learn in school,”¹³ as generally agreed-upon indicators of achievement of basic skills, they have become cause for growing concern. In countries where there have been significant increases in primary school enrolment, studies show that few children actually complete their basic education having achieved minimal competencies in literacy and numeracy. The combination of weak performance and high drop-out rates are attributed to a range of external and internal factors that directly affect the quality of learning processes. The recognition that the quality of learning interactions and environments, however measured, negatively impacts access as well as retention has led to the realization that the numbers of children, youth and adults occupying spaces in schools and programmes will not be enough to fulfil the promise of EFA.

10. As pointed out in the 2008 EFA GMR, more and more countries are carrying out national learning assessments that are curriculum based and subject oriented. These measures are designed to provide country-wide and school-specific information about learning outcomes according to nationally defined standards.¹⁴ While the results gained from these types of measures have received a great deal of attention from the international community, they are inadequate tools for measuring the full impact of quality education and may even have a detrimental effect that widens disparities, especially when poorly administered. Nor are they capable of assessing such important dimensions of quality learning as psycho-social development, creativity and teamwork.

11. There is widespread recognition of the need for systems to recognize indicators of quality beyond traditional data collection on enrolment, attendance and attainment. These would include, for example, methods for ongoing formative assessment of basic knowledge and skills acquisition as well as life skills, behaviours and attitudes. Assessment of quality education at the level of learning should also incorporate methods that encourage learners, parents and other community members to reflect on the processes, environment and content of learning and to become active participants with teachers and managers in improving the quality of the programme or school.

12. Classroom based assessment techniques promote two-way communication on the effectiveness of teaching, and numerous strategies for parent and community involvement can and should be applied, for example focus groups on

¹³ 2008 EFA Global Monitoring Report, p. 67

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 68

creating safe and healthy learning environments, constructive child discipline, and the relevance of the curriculum and learning materials to community life, values and aspirations. Part of meeting the quality challenge thus involves the development and use of innovative and inclusive methodologies for monitoring both learning processes and outcomes.

Discussion Questions:

In view of the different approaches to assessing the quality of learning resources and outcomes,

- *Should more resources be placed into building national assessment systems in EFA-FTI countries?*
- *What can/should be done about weak performance on national and international assessments?*
- *What additional methods/instruments for measuring the quality of teaching and learning in EFA-FTI countries should be promoted?*

Work in Progress

Desk Reviews on Quality and Assessment

13. Based on concerns related to the above issues, the FTI decided to set up a Quality of Learning Outcomes (QLO) Task Team focusing on quality issues. So far, the Team has focused mainly on ways of improving learning outcomes in FTI countries with a view toward recommending improvements to country endorsement processes.

14. Following decisions made at the Dakar meeting (December 2007), UNESCO has been asked to undertake a desk review of approaches, factors and indicators for measuring and enhancing quality learning in EFA-FTI countries, funded by the Government of the Russian Federation. As described in the QLO TT Update of 4 April, this research will present an historical overview of approaches to conceptualizing and measuring quality education from the perspective of EFA-FTI partners (including the major international organizations, bilaterals, donors and NGOs). It will also identify, compare and synthesize indicators of quality present in EFA-FTI endorsed country plans. A third component of the review, an analytical review of existing national assessment systems in the same countries will be undertaken by the World Bank. The two complementary studies will make concrete recommendations for improving the Appraisal Guidelines and Indicative Framework as well as for planning capacity development activities aimed at accelerating progress toward reaching the EFA goal on quality as reflected in the national plans.

15. A cross-organizational review of concepts of quality education identified in documents produced by UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, DFID, The World Bank, and the UNESCO Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of Quality Education (LLECE) was completed in December 2007 as a preliminary step in

anticipation of undertaking the quality desk review in 2008. The themes, factors and indicators related to quality improvement evident in these documents were grouped according to: (1) descriptors of learning outcomes, or evidence that learning has taken place, (2) characteristics of quality learning processes, the second of which facilitates the first, and (3) attitudes and perspectives on the education system as a whole.

16. A partial review and analysis of EFA-FTI country national education plans (twenty-four of thirty-two countries'¹⁵ endorsed as of the end of 2007) was carried out to determine if there were any general trends in approaches to quality in general, indicators of quality, and ways of measuring learning processes and outcomes. These factors and sub-factors were identified and grouped in a somewhat different way, as they tended to be expressed in the plans in terms of (1) baseline indicators, (2) enabling inputs (2) learner characteristics (3) teaching and learning processes, and (4) learning outcomes. Caveats, including innovative ideas for improving the quality of education within the system, were also noted.

17. Once available data from all organizations within the mandate of the desk review (including donors, NGOs and community based organizations) have been collected, a comprehensive overview of the evolving concept of quality from the global perspective will be presented in the form of a final report, to be printed in English, French, Spanish and Russian.¹⁶ The report will also contain the relevant data and analysis of the thirty-two EFA-FTI national education plans, together with recommendations for the FTI Indicative Framework and additional checklist criteria in the FTI endorsement process.

QLO Task Team On-Line Survey

18. The Team is conducting an on-line survey intended for FTI donors, consisting of nine questions regarding possible changes and additions to FTI endorsement and evaluation requirements on the Global Learning Portal www.glp.net. The poll was designed by Russia and USAID with significant inputs from UNESCO, the World Bank, the FTI Secretariat and France. A preliminary summary analysis of the responses from 51 donors is presented in the report, "An Update on the Quality of Learning Outcomes Task Team" and distributed to the Technical Meeting of FTI in Tokyo in April 2008.

Other Activities

19. During the month of April (2008), as part of the activities connected to Global Action Week, UNESCO is conducting an open online discussion forum on the theme: "Quality Education to End Exclusion Now." In addition, as a means of further informing the ongoing and future activities of the QTT, UNESCO and the Russian Federation are planning to host an international experts' meeting on

¹⁵ Burkina Faso, Guyana, Nicaragua, Niger, The Gambia, Mozambique, Vietnam, Yemen, Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Moldova, Tajikistan, Timor Leste, Mongolia, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Albania, and Kyrgyz Republic

¹⁶ A multilingual CD will also be available.

assessing learning processes and outcomes at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, with participation of FTI partners. This event is foreseen for July 2008.

Discussion Questions:

In view of the need to help countries gear up efforts to improve quality learning processes and outcomes in order to meet EFA and Millennium Development goals,

- *Should countries applying for FTI endorsement be required to state their plans for quality improvement?*
- *If yes, should they be provided with a specific framework or guidelines for doing so?*
- *What additional activities should be proposed to help EFA-FTI countries meet the quality challenge?*

The Way Forward

In anticipation of the key issues raised in the discussions on the definition(s) and approaches to measuring quality education, and in light of work already undertaken to move these processes forward in FTI countries, the following provisional recommendations are proposed as priority areas for accelerated action.

1. The scope of the FTI Quality of Learning Outcomes Task Team should be expanded to include advising FTI on quality indicators for learning processes as well as learning outcomes.
2. FTI partners should provide technical assistance to countries with endorsed country plans in defining, planning, implementing and monitoring quality education.
3. Capacity development activities aimed at strengthening the quality components of national education plans should be undertaken immediately by FTI partners in collaboration with countries in the process of applying for FTI endorsement.

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