

**EFA-FTI Global and Regional Activities (GRA) Program**  
**Thematic Area: Learning Outcomes**  
**Comments by UNESCO (ED/BHL, IIEP, UIS, UNESCO Santiago)**  
**for the Second Consultation**  
**8 August 2011**

Firstly, we would like to express our appreciation for the work done by the EFA-FTI Secretariat (FTI-S) in trying to accommodate our previous observations. In particular, the overall approach explained in the introductory notes (pages i-vii in each of the thematic papers) is a sound statement on how the EFA-FTI partnership plans to execute its new approach to support countries.

UNESCO also appreciates this opportunity offered by the EFA-S to comment on the revised draft papers and to propose concrete areas of collaboration. UNESCO confirm our interest in collaborating with FTI-S through working in areas of its competences in general (e.g. IIEP - developing the potential of partner countries in designing, implementing, and monitoring their education sector plans, UIS - data, statistics and indicators) and would like to share our specific comments on the paper on learning outcomes that are organised as follows: (A) those pertaining to our interest in, and readiness to becoming an EFA-FTI partner in specific activities as requested in the introductory notes; (B) comments on the text. We hope that details and nuance can be put back in at the later stages when the EFA-FTI Secretariat refines the proposed activities (We would like to retain main points of our comments provided during the first round of consultation, although they are not repeated here).

**(A) Activities which UNESCO is interested in and is ready to contribute to**

**2.1 Further work on refinement of indicators**

**2.3.9 Learner and system assessment**

**UIS (Activity 2.1 and Activity 2.3.9)**

- The UIS would like to lead a consultative process to develop standards for oral reading assessments (page 16). It already uses such processes to set standards for information on education and other domains (like science). The mandates of the UIS clearly include development of standards in its areas of action.
- Collaboration among assessment agencies working close to the end of the primary cycle (pages 15-16). Again, the UIS is already engaged in such activity. Since mid-2010, we have discussed with PASEC, SACMEQ and LLECE prospects for countries and donors of collaboration among the three agencies. To include IEA in this dialogue is a natural next step.
- ED/BHL will facilitate setting up a Consortium of regional networks specialized in learning assessment and monitoring of learning outcomes, for example PASEC, SACMEQ and LLECE. The purpose of this Consortium would be to bring together a core group of specialists in learning assessment to draw on their collective experiences in this field to identify and analyze constraints and propose the way forward to tackle the challenges of education quality today. The Consortium would provide an interactive platform for exchanges of practices, emerging research evidence, and lessons learnt in order to refine methodologies, to better inform the policy dialogue on these issues across regions and at global level, possibly by consolidating the different approaches to learning assessment. As such, the Consortium would help strengthen joint technical cooperation at country and regional levels. ED/BHL would work closely with IIEP, UIS, UNESCO/ORELAC and other core partners. The proposed activity will add tremendous

value to the UNESCO Quality Framework, which recognizes the imminent role of assessment in diagnosing quality education and learning effectiveness.

### **IIEP (Activity 2.3.9 - Learner and system assessment)**

The importance of evaluating the quality of learning outcomes was evidenced during the 1990 Jomtien World Conference as well as during the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum. It was recently reinforced in education strategy papers by major developmental partners (World Bank 2010; USAID 2011; DIFD 2010), that encouraged all countries to shift focus from “education for all (EFA)” to “learning for all (LFA)”.

There was also a major policy shift which occurred in 2009 regarding the Fast Track Initiative’s (FTI’s) approval procedures in order to ensure “that learning outcomes are placed at the core of the FTI agenda”.

In particular, the FTI’s second reading skills indicator, namely:

Proportion of students who are able to read with comprehension, according to their countries' curricular goals, by the end of primary school is considered most critical because: (i) skills in official national language of instruction are usually required for a successful transition to secondary schooling; and (ii) skills for “reading for meaning” of pupils have been identified as important competency when confronted with the kinds of passages of text that they would be challenged with at higher grade levels.

The interpretation of EFA and LFA in above context suggests that three concepts of equity, access, and quality cannot be addressed as isolated issues. Rather, they need to be managed as an interdependent network aimed at providing “equitable access to a quality education” for different sub-groups of people including (genders, geographic locations, and socio-economic levels).

#### *Gender Equality in Education*

Promoting gender equality is an important aspect in education so that both boys and girls could achieve their full potential according to their needs.

UNESCO’s EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007 indicated that although the gender disparity in enrolment has decreased since 1999, gender equality remains elusive (UNESCO, 2007). It has been also indicated that beyond ‘parity’, gender equality would require:

- Safe and non-discriminatory school environment
- The presence of enough teachers to act as gender role models,
- Un-biased teacher-based dynamics in the classroom and teacher training in gender issues
- Un-biased learning content
- An absence of significant gender differences in learning outcomes
- Less gendered choice of subjects in tertiary education

Furthermore, The latest results in the assessment in Southern and Eastern African region indicated that the size and the direction of gender differences in learning achievement at the Grade 6 level has been very stable across the period 2000 and 2007, whether it was the boys or girls who performed better. These results have lead researchers to question whether past gender-related educational interventions have neglected the question of learning achievement (Saito, 2010), especially in rural schools and low socio-economic groups. Further research is now underway in order to explore possible cross-national explanations for the presence, and absence, of differences between girls and boys in learning achievement. These explanations may be related to: classroom teaching, school environment, and family background.

### *Past and Existing Experience*

Over the last 15 years, IIEP has been collaborating with a network of 15 Ministries of Education known as Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). IIEP's involvement included capacity building of educational planners and researchers in conducting integrated research and training initiatives that provide "hands-on" experience in the use of modern survey research methodologies to cross-national studies in order to make informed decisions about the conditions of schooling and the quality of education. SACMEQ has conducted three large-scale cross-national studies of the quality of education, targeted at the upper primary level: SACMEQ I (1995; 7 Ministries with Reading), SACMEQ II (2000; 14 Ministries with Reading and Mathematics), and SACMEQ III (2007; 15 Ministries with Reading, Mathematics, and HIV and AIDS Knowledge).

Based on the success of IIEP's work with SACMEQ, the IIEP has received new demands for services and support from other regions, such as Francophone Africa, Arab States, and Latin America. Following a request from *Conférence des ministres de l'Éducation des pays ayant le français en partage* (CONFEMEN) during 2009-2010, researchers of SACMEQ and *Programme on the Analysis of Education Systems de CONFEMEN* (PASEC) have commenced information-sharing activities associated with research methodology. The IIEP has facilitated this cooperation, which has resulted in the insertion of selected SACMEQ test items in PASEC data collection instruments on Reading, Mathematics, and HIV and AIDS Knowledge. During January 2011, the IIEP hosted a two-day International Exchange Meeting between SACMEQ and PASEC in Paris in order to share research results on: (i) pupil learning achievement by gender and socio-economic status, (ii) the effectiveness of HIV and AIDS prevention education programmes, and (iii) experiences concerning the use of advanced research methodologies that are required for conducting large-scale international assessments.

### *Suggested Approach*

In close cooperation and consultation with SACMEQ and PASEC governing bodies, IIEP will conduct a collaborative research and training programmes related to gender differences in learning achievement based on the SACMEQ and PASEC studies. It is expected that it would contribute to the continuation and reinforcement of the already-established IIEP's programme of cooperation between SACMEQ and PASEC.

The proposed project will have the following components: (i) qualitative research to **investigate reasons for stable trends in gender differences in learning achievement**; and (ii) a series of **training workshops on large-scale assessment with gender focus**.

- (i) Qualitative research to investigate reasons for stable trends in gender differences in learning achievement – In order to further explore reasons for the stability in the gender differences of achievement, quantitative data based on SACMEQ and PASEC studies will be complemented with more qualitative investigations at (i) the policy level and (ii) the classroom level. Specific questions are: How have the classes been managed by teachers in order to give equal classroom treatment to boys and girls? How have the textbooks been used in the classroom? What views and beliefs do teachers and school heads have regarding the status of girls and boys? What views and beliefs do pupils and pupils' parents have regarding the status of girls and boys?
- (ii) A series of training workshops on large-scale assessment with gender focus – These training workshops capitalize on IIEP's experience in capacity building in the use of modern survey research methodologies. The target audience will be planners and researchers in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. They will include a series of techniques and methodologies that are important in the research cycle to study gender differences in achievement. They will include: (i) moving from policy

concerns on gender issue to specific research questions; (ii) construction of gender-bias free Reading and Mathematics tests using the curriculum blueprint; (iii) equating different tests in order to measure gender differences in achievement over time; (iv) construction of background questionnaires to capture important information that could explain gender differences in achievement; (v) scientific sampling techniques based on the probability of selection of boys and girls; (vi) logistics for data preparation (data collection and data validation) to achieve improved data quality; (vii) scientific technique to detect gender bias in test items; (viii) detailed item-level “skills-audit” process to describe the levels of competency; (ix) data analyses and innovative visualization on the status and trends in time of gender differences in achievement.

**Deliverables** will include publications and training packages.

## **2.2 Indicators repository**

- The UIS is already developing a catalogue, or repository, of information yielded by assessments and examinations from national and international sources. The UIS repository covers ISCED levels 1-2; hence it will include information on early grades, too, which is a key interest of EFA-FTI. The UIS is willing to take into consideration EFA-FTI needs especially now that the catalogue is being tested. We are pleased to notice that the proposal already identifies UIS as a potential partner for its repository of indicators (page 6).

### **2.3.1 Systematic improvements and quality frameworks for quality**

ED/BHL

UNESCO welcomes that the revised paper captures issues related to improving learning outcomes in a more comprehensive manner, noting the need for a more holistic and systematic approach to quality (e.g. first paragraph on page 2, Section 2.3.10 Systematic improvements and QA frameworks on page 18).

While the draft paper still appears to put a relatively strong emphasis on teachers, classroom and school for early-grade reading, maths and life skills, which the GRA programme seems to intend to maintain as a distinct feature of its future efforts, we believe that improving learning outcomes can be handled much more effectively and meaningfully when it is addressed through a holistic approach to quality that covers other inter-related factors such as teaching and learning, teachers, learners, physical and psycho-social environments, curricula, learning and teaching materials, governance, underpinned by cross-cutting concerns about relevance/responsiveness, system efficiency and equity/inclusion. It is particularly important, therefore, that the global initiative such as the GRA programme does not lose the sight of the crucial importance of a holistic approach, and we do, indeed, welcome the proposed activity in Section 2.3.10 on systematic improvements and quality assurance frameworks (p.18). We believe that this Quality Framework can well respond to the concern of the EFA-FTI Secretariat that systems and political-economic/institutional approaches as well as work on quality assurance systems tend to be detached from what is happening in the classroom through ensuring cross-referencing of different factors of quality even when a country wishes to strengthen just some elements of education systems (e.g. teachers, curricula) or ultimate learning outcomes.

Building on our previous proposal, UNESCO would like to contribute to this specific element of the GRA programme on systemic improvements and QA frameworks in the following manners:

Through its Quality Framework,

- ensuring that efforts to improve quality of education is made through a systematic and balanced approach through developing and implementing UNESCO’s comprehensive “Quality Framework for System Analysis/Diagnosis and Monitoring of Educational Quality”. (It is recalled that we previously mentioned that “the work that the FTI is embarking upon can be subsumed into this Framework”); and
- Supporting relevant thematic activities listed in the GRA paper through the work of sub-groups of the UNESCO Quality Framework that are composed of UNESCO staff across the organization, given that many thematic areas proposed in the GRA paper overlap with the areas covered by the UNESCO Quality Framework sub-groups (see Annex 1). This will be in addition to support that will be offered by different parts of UNESCO (e.g. Institutes, Field offices, Divisions of HQ) to some of the activities proposed by GRA paper.

Through supporting higher education systems,

- Setting standard for higher education “community service” and strengthening the role of higher education institutions as national and regional hubs for providing technical support service. Alternatively, UNESCO proposes to include this element on higher education in the GRA paper as a stand alone activity as the ECD activity which does not fall into the EFA-FTI’s mandated areas but is a crucial element for improving learning outcomes.

## **(B) comments on the text of the revised paper on learning outcomes**

We would like to suggest that the final version of the paper undergo a through editing to increase readability and coherence<sup>1</sup> as well as to eliminate mistakes of content.<sup>2</sup> There are undue repetitions, verbosity, jargon, contradictions, and the like. The paper of Education Finance could be taken as a good example of clear wording and exposition of ideas.

Please also find our specific comments in the track-change format on the table presented in Section 2.3.10 Systematic improvements and QA frameworks (pp.19-20 of the GRA paper).

<p><b>Proposed activity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop quality assurance framework, benchmark systems or quality framework for systemic analysis and monitoring, and agreements amongst countries to step up their own use of quality assurance frameworks</li> <li>• Comprehensive analysis of education systems through quality lens to identify weak elements and provision of support to countries in view of improving the necessary elements</li> <li>• Specific areas of interest, given their importance, would include:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- teacher management and policy systems and benchmarks</li> <li>- Assessment system benchmarking (note link to reading assessment – while noting that the aspects of assessment noted here are the general issues referring to assessment systems, not the specific ones referring to reading)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Development of quantitative service-delivery indexes or benchmarks based on school-level indicators of time on task, teacher</li> </ul>
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<sup>1</sup> As it is now, we have the impression that different people wrote different sections of the paper, but this process was not followed by a “consistency check”, thus the paper lacks coherence in format and substance.. Some examples of the problems are provided in the annex

<sup>2</sup> Some examples are provided as in the annex 2.

	effectiveness, finance, etc.
<b>Type of activity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk-based analysis and development</li> <li>• Workshops to propose and delineate field trials and country involvement/adoption<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Meeting(s) to coordinate emergence of such framework when proposed by more than one partner<sup>4</sup></li> <li>• Field tests and trial of frameworks (or aspects of frameworks) or indices</li> <li>• Production of manuals, descriptions, hosting of web-based sources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Web-sites with comparative information on how countries' policies and practices compare to benchmark</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Dissemination at workshops</li> </ul>
<b>Link with results framework indicators</b>	Outcome1: Improved learning outcomes and other measures of quality
<b>Proposed approaches</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convene consultative forums with both technical experts and other partners</li> <li>• Simultaneously convene consultative forums with partner countries to ensure demand-led approach and ensure a balance of country interests<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Pilot framework or aspects of frameworks (see footnote referenced above) or field-based service delivery indexes</li> <li>• Disseminate framework ideas even prior to trial, since trials may or may not be complete trials, and countries may desire to experiment with certain aspects relatively on their own</li> <li>• Dissemination of results of piloting, as a matter of process and mutual learning regarding implementation</li> <li>• Documentation Ensuring sustainability via strengthening of academic institutions within countries, and as institutions. Analyze, identify and document cases of good practices that already exist in countries where the academy is responsive, in an institutional way, to ensuring perennial responsiveness of education policies to rapidly changing social contexts and to contribute to quality attainment in education through applied research and technical assistance needs (e.g. MISR at Makerere University, faculty of education at Kenyatta University in Kenya). These practices will be used as a platform for setting standards for higher education institutions, so as to eventually enable them to contribute to</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> In our view it is important to note that most countries of course already have elements of quality assurance frameworks or benchmarking systems. Thus, it is important not to base program assumptions on the notion of countries trailing whole new systems (unless they specifically desire to do so). However, not all aspects of such systems, as they currently exist in countries, work equally well, and sometimes they have not been recently thought through, analysed, or widely dialogued, within the countries themselves, as integrated systems (so they may be a bit stale and so no one looks or critiques their functioning as systems). Furthermore, in some countries these systems may actually work reasonably well, in the sense of system engineering (e.g. assessment an exams data are linked to teacher supervision and support, and both are in turn linked to teacher professional development, sometimes even with specific referral systems) but the pedagogical content is sometimes vague or not of proven effectiveness, so the systems do not result in actual improvement in learning outcomes. Thus, what is most often needed may be: a) a shoring up of aspects of the systems that may be weak but not wholesale adoption of an entire approach; b) refreshing the conceptualization of the system as a true system; and c) retooling the pedagogical or "technical" content of the systems so as to actually boost learning outcomes (or indeed other tangible expressions of school quality).

<sup>4</sup> Some partners have different elements and/or varying approaches on this. It is important to unify forces and chart clear ways forward.

<sup>5</sup> FTI-S has a mandate to work with low-income countries. Other partners' agendas include middle-income or even high-income countries. How this focus issue gets worked out in practice requires more work. As a matter of practical reality, it seems more likely that international agencies could have more impact on low and middle-income countries, and that improvement in high-income countries is a more a matter of those countries' collaborative processes via their own Ministries of Education or OECD rather than UN-family international agencies or international NGOs, although it is desired that these different categories of countries can find more common platforms to work with multi-lateral organizations or international NGOs in view of mutual learning in the future.

	sustainable capacity at country level to support education reforms and manage change.
Expected Deliverables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed consultations with experts, partner agencies and countries</li> <li>• Field tests with lessons learnt produced, including field application of benchmarking frameworks and assessment of local institutionalization of ability to support educational improvement (e.g. in-country universities, think-tanks, and CSOs)</li> <li>• Live dissemination of lessons learnt</li> <li>• Documentary dissemination and repository of lessons learnt (e.g. web-based platform created)</li> <li>• Panel or workshop on best practices for institutional involvement of academic institutions in ongoing school and system quality monitoring and methodological development</li> </ul>
Timeframe	All events completed by 2014

## Annex 1 : Supporting relevant thematic activities listed in the GRA paper through the work of sub-groups of the UNESCO Quality Framework

Key areas of GRA programme activity	Key areas (sub-groups) of UNESCO's Quality Framework
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research, literature review, knowledge packaging</li> <li>• Technical workshop, peer learning events and conferences</li> <li>• Scalable experiences, technical assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By end 2011 – convening technical consultative forums to develop and pilot test the framework</li> <li>• 2012 - piloting in several countries / production of a set of toolkits backed by resource materials - production of final output including a web-based final output</li> <li>• 2013 onwards – technical support in selected countries</li> </ul>
Further work on refinement of indicators, Indicators repository	Learning outcomes assessment
Curricular issues	Curricula
Research-based instruction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textbooks</li> <li>• Systematic feedback to students</li> <li>• Instruction time</li> <li>• Scripting of writing for beginning reading</li> <li>• Instructional and grouping methods</li> </ul>	Teaching Teachers Learners Learning Physical and psychosocial environments Curricula
Use of local languages	Teaching Learning Teachers Learners Physical and psychosocial environments Curricula
Effective early-childhood education methodology	ECCE
Effective and efficient math instruction	Teaching Teacher Curricula
Teacher training and supervision	Teacher
Remediation strategies for students falling behind	Teaching Learning Physical and psychosocial environments
Textbook production, financing and distribution, and use	Curricula Financing
Learner and system assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End-of-cycle written assessment</li> <li>• Early written assessment</li> <li>• Oral assessment</li> </ul>	Learners Learning outcomes assessment
Systematic improvement and quality assurance framework	UNESCO Quality Framework underpinned by three cross-cutting themes (relevance/responsiveness, equity/inclusion and system efficiency) and addresses “financing for education”, “governance” and “graduates and lifelong-learning”
Political economy, accountability and sustainability, including local level	
Technical workshops, peer learning events and conferences	
Scalable Experiences, TA around Education Sector Plans	

## Annex 2 : Examples of problems the paper has, both in format and content (Provided by UIS)

- a. Page 2. Paragraph starting with “Education for all’...”, Last sentence. Actually, this issue applies not only to donor funding, but also to local funding: wasting taxpayers’ money is unjustifiable not only in relation to taxpayers behind donors.
- b. Page 2. Paragraph starting with “It is proposed that a case in point”; the expression “a case in point” is used three times in three lines.
- c. Page 3. Paragraph starting with “The aim of activities...”. Lines 2 and 3. The use of percentages<sup>6</sup> and then implying a sort of equivalence with standardised scores does not make any sense and are erroneous statements.  

The first mistake is made again at the end of the paragraph, when talking about doubling or tripling reading skills.<sup>7</sup> Even if reading can be measured using different continuous scales, that does not mean that reading is a continuous variable; therefore, the use of ratios here (expressed as percentages) does not make any sense.

The second mistake is the completely nonsensical equivalence suggested between percentages and standardised scores.
- d. Page 2. First paragraph under “Proposed activities”. We need to differentiate what we can achieve by conducting a given activity and its ultimate purpose. Measuring learning does not improve learning. Measuring can inform people’s actions that can ultimately affect learning. Thus, the wording of this sentence is misleading.
- e. Page 3. First paragraph under “Research and Knowledge”. Second line. What is “data on indicators”? Do you mean “data and indicators”? Metadata? Given the context we would suggest: “... repository of information on learning outcomes.”
- f. Page 8. First paragraph under “Research-based ...”. Lines 6 to 8. The sentence that starts with “However...” is a poor reaction to previous criticisms and it is repeated in other parts of the text. Acknowledging that there is no one-size-fits-all kind of solution is not equivalent to say: *while there are other options, there is one that works* which surreptitiously implicates that other options are less valid than the one being advocated. This is exactly equivalent to endorse a single view of things and must be improved.
- g. Page 11. First paragraph under “Effective and ...”. Line 3. What is a “variable” philosophy? Do you mean “diverse approaches are encouraged”?
- h. Page 11. Fifth bullet point under “Effective and ...”. Different numeral systems should be treated more carefully. This issue goes well beyond diversity of names in decimal systems: for instance, a vigesimal system is different from a decimal one.
- i. Page 13. First bullet point under “Textbook production...”. First sentence. “The most” is used twice in the same question.
- j. Page 17. Paragraph starting with “A plethora...”. Line 4. TIMSS is not an assessment conducted in primary-level programmes (grade 8 is usually lower secondary).

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<sup>6</sup> By the way, what is an improvement of 100% in reading skills? Decoding twice as many words as before in a given unit of time?

<sup>7</sup> By the way, if students can read zero words, doubling or tripling zero is exactly the same (zero).

- k. Page 17. Third bullet point. This statement is not clear. What is doing PISA (or a reference with quotation marks that are used for a non-discernible purpose) doing here? Again, preaching in favour of a “fluency test” (and PISA is not that) and promoting simplistic recipes reappears in the text for no justifiable reason. Advocating for fluency tests contradicts the recommendations quoted in the last paragraph of page 4: “The panel recommended (...) drawing attention away from fluency as a goal (...) not making inter-country comparisons based on fluency and especially not on fluency alone.....” We agree with the recommendation of the panel and would like to suggest that the FTI-S adopts it.
- l. Page 18. Second paragraph under “2.3.10. Systems ...”. Lines 16-17. While the text advocates that test scores should be “intuitively comprehensible” (page 15), it uses measures in a cryptic way: references to the proportion of variance that is explained by school factors as .2 or 1 without any explanation do not contribute to the readability of the text. Moreover, expecting an explained variance associated to these factors to be “more in the range of 1” is not a sound way of expressing the idea behind the whole paragraph: “we would like to see that students’ achievement differences are explained to a lesser extent by contextual factors, that is to say, we would like to see a situation where pre-existing differences (family SES, etc) do not have a significant impact on learning”.