

Access to Secondary and Higher Education Lags in Latin America

"Investing in secondary and higher education-not only in elementary education-pays high dividends for emerging economies," states the recent report *Financing Education: Investments and Yields*, by Unesco and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The report analyzes the gap between education levels and economic growth in 16 emerging countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Peru.

The same issue was addressed at the 2001 Quebec City Summit of the Americas. In reaffirming their commitment to previous Summit proposals regarding education, the heads of state who gathered in Quebec acknowledged that "progress toward more democratic societies, growing economies and social equity depends on an educated citizenship." Specifically, the Summit Plan of Action sets a target date of 2010 for "access to quality secondary education for a minimum of 75% of all youths" and 2005 for "eliminating gender disparities in elementary and secondary education."

Unfortunately, the Unesco and OECD document finds only slow progress toward these goals, which are crucial for creating an experienced and well-informed labor force in the region.

According to the study, in 1960 adults in the five countries listed above completed an average of only 3.4 years of schooling. By 2000, this figure had risen to 7.6-an improvement, but still below the OECD average of 10.2 years. "At this rate, another 30 years will go by before some of these countries reach current OECD levels," the report's authors conclude.

Another regional Unesco report on education discovered that only 54% of children and teenagers in Latin America actually attend school; in other words, "there are 20 million boys and girls who are receiving no education or go no further than elementary school." And while university enrollments increased during the 1990s, as of 1998 only 9.5 million students in the entire region attended college, with 60% of them concentrated in just three countries: Brazil, Mexico and Argentina.

Not surprisingly, the Unesco-OECD study confirms that as education levels rise, so do long-term economic growth and the benefits for individuals. The authors cite the case of Chile, where, in 1960, the educational average for the population between 15 and 64 years old was 6.9 years and the per capita GDP was less than US\$4,000. By 2000, educational levels had increased to almost 10 years and per capita GDP was close to US\$7,000.

In Argentina and Brazil, the report goes on to note, the average five-year-old currently can expect 16 years of schooling. But as an editorial in Argentina's *La Nación* points out, "while this figure shows progress from earlier years, the battle

still to be waged is how to open access to ever greater sectors of the population to higher education."

Some observers acknowledge that diversity in terms of population size, age distribution and average income complicates efforts to attain uniform educational rates across the region. As a whole, however, even the rate of progress has remained slow, with the exceptions of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru and Chile.

Another trend observed in the study is the growing use of private funding for education, including expenditures by individual households. In Chile and Paraguay, for example, more than 40% of total investment in education comes from private sources. As a result, private education has flourished, ranging from independent private schools to public institutions that are "subcontracted" to nongovernmental or municipal organizations.

As the report points out, however, the private sector cannot solve the problem of access to education, given the high levels of inequality and poverty in the region. Unesco and the OECD encourage the governments of emerging countries to invest in education to catch up to the developed world. In many cases, this investment also must include job training to give the population the skills demanded by today's labor market.

As the report's findings make clear, educational progress has been slow in the two years since the Quebec City Summit, especially considering that many of the proposals in question trace back to previous summits in Santiago (1998) and Miami (1994).

Without an increased and effective investment in human capital, Unesco and the OECD conclude, Latin America and the Caribbean will lag behind other parts of the world in developing the knowledge-based sectors of their economies, one of the keys to growth. With effective and fairly distributed investment, in contrast, knowledge becomes a renewable and self-generating asset, marking the difference between successful and less-successful economies.

The Quebec Summit declared, "better educational policies and greater investment in our educational systems will contribute to reduce income inequality and to close the digital divide in our hemisphere." It's about time that real action was taken to address these goals.

For more information, see: www.unesco.org, www.oecd.org, www.summit-americas.org/Quebec-Education/education-eng.htm