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## **The Role and Relevance of INES in Canada**

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*This article considers the impact of the INES program in Canada, as well as the relevance of the INES publications from a Canadian perspective. The main issue considered is how the INES indicator information is used in Canada, through a discussion of the impact of Education at a Glance, and an examination of pan-Canadian and provincial/territorial indicator programs. Some of the possible future directions for INES in the Canadian context are also discussed.*

### **Introduction**

In order to assess whether the Canadian population is equipped with the educational tools it will need to meet the global challenges of the twenty-first century, policy makers are looking for information about what is happening elsewhere in the world, and seeking mechanisms to determine how well Canada is doing compared to other countries. OECD's Indicators of Education Systems (INES) Program helps provide some of that information. The INES program serves several functions: the indicators provide basic internationally comparable statistics about various key aspects of education inputs, processes, and outputs; the results reported from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) offer a perspective on student achievement and related variables; and the indicators allow policy makers to consider the interplay of various factors, exploring similarities to and differences from their own education systems. An indirect benefit for many countries may also be the opportunity to learn from the combined expertise of the INES network representatives in developing national indicator programs.

Canada is a committed participant in the INES program and has been involved since the beginning, with at least one representative on

each INES committee. Copies of *Education at a Glance* (EAG) and *Education Policy Analysis* (EPA) are purchased annually by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada and distributed to each ministry/department of education and training, though the number of copies that can be made available is limited by cost considerations. A committee of senior policy makers is given regular updates on INES activities.

While the impact of INES in Canada is likely similar in many ways to that in other OECD countries, particular challenges have to be faced in the Canadian context. The first is that education in Canada is the responsibility of the ten provinces and three territories. No federal department of education exists, although some federal programs, such as support for internet connectivity for schools, relate to education issues, and federal departments may support education initiatives on the request of the provinces and territories. As a result of Canada's federated system, INES data are primarily supplied and used by provincial and territorial ministries of education and training<sup>1</sup>. After the difficulties of data gathering in a decentralized system have been overcome, issues may arise around how to report information in a way that will be useful at a provincial/territorial level. The challenges of bridging vast distances and of responding to and reflecting Canada's cultural and linguistic diversity add still further complications to the process.

This article considers the impact that the INES program has had in Canada, and the relevance of the INES publications from a Canadian perspective. The main focus is on how the INES indicator information is used in Canada, through a discussion of the impact of *Education at a Glance*, and an examination of pan-Canadian and provincial/territorial indicator programs. Consideration is also given to some possible future directions for INES in Canada.

### **INES Publications in Canada**

The main purpose of INES is to allow countries to assess and monitor their education systems in comparison with the education systems of other countries. The annual INES publications, *Education at a Glance* and *Education Policy Analysis*, provide an international picture of education that allows policy makers to consider a variety of measures in a broad context. Sometimes this is a simple comparison: how did students in Canada perform compared to students in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Japan? Sometimes it involves a

contextual consideration of several indicators together: how do expenditures compare when demographics and staff costs are factored in? Sometimes the indicators spark ideas for policy through an examination of what other countries are doing in response to a particular issue, such as special education. Typically, however, indicator data are reported in EAG at the country level, which can pose a challenge for federal countries, such as Canada.

In a 1999 survey of policy makers across Canada (CMEC, 1999), respondents indicated that the first indicator resources they turn to are those of their own jurisdiction, if available, followed by pan-Canadian indicators. International indicators were seen as important, however. Respondents stated that they use INES data both in assessing policy internally and in order to answer the question, "How are we doing?" for the media and the public. *Education at a Glance* can also play a role in directing media attention to education in Canada, as was the case in response to the 2001 edition of EAG.

Quebec, which reported that policy makers referred to the OECD indicators several times a week, made the greatest use of EAG in Canada. This intensity of use is consistent with the cultural and linguistic uniqueness of Quebec's position within Canada, and its interest in comparisons with the international francophone community. Larger jurisdictions, such as Ontario and Alberta, used EAG regularly for comparisons and to provide perspectives on provincial policies and programs. In other jurisdictions the publication tended to be read with interest when first issued, and to function thereafter mainly as a reference tool to be consulted when questions with an international dimension arose. Several policy makers pointed out, however, that even though their direct use of EAG might be infrequent, the publication was still highly valuable, as the international arena was becoming increasingly important as part of the overall accountability picture. They felt that they needed to know what was happening in other countries in order to gain a clearer perspective on the local policies being developed. *Education at a Glance* and, to a lesser extent, *Education Policy Analysis* were characterized as worthwhile publications because they provided background material on the international context of education and were an excellent reference source. Strong support was voiced for the level of detail and comprehensiveness in EAG, which could be drawn on to provide a rich international analysis around specific topics.

Respondents who worked in the area of post-secondary education stated that international comparisons were especially important to them because of the increasing internationalization of post-secondary education, particularly at the university level. Post-secondary institutions must compete in the international arena, not only for foreign students who might choose to study in Canada, but also with institutions from other countries that may attract Canadian students. While the first concern for policy makers is to consider indicators that relate to the Canadian context, respondents noted that global analyses of policy issues help to provide a more complete perspective. INES produces a number of indicators that focus on access to and participation and completion in the post-secondary sector, in addition to indicators on issues such as the distribution of foreign students. Policy makers and institutional administrators can use information such as that provided through INES to ascertain how Canada is doing.

Respondents were clear that the INES data were useful and necessary to help with the development and explanation of education policy. The reality of operating in a decentralized system, however, affected how the INES publications were used. Information is provided to the OECD and reported in EAG at a "Canadian" level, but because education in Canada is a provincial/territorial responsibility, policy makers most often need to know, not just how Canada is doing, but how a particular province or territory is doing. This meant that the INES data were more often consulted for the information they could provide about other countries than for information about Canada. The lack of data at the provincial/territorial level was reported as the most significant barrier to more extensive use of *Education at a Glance* in Canada.

### **The Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program and INES**

One significant impact that INES has had in Canada has been through its use as a model for the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program (PCEIP). In the mid-1990s, the Canadian Education Statistics Council (CESC), a partnership between CMEC and Statistics Canada, decided that a Canadian indicators program was needed. In large part, this was a response to the need for data to respond to the growing interest in accountability measures. PCEIP was created with the goal of developing a set of statistical measures that would provide information on education systems in Canada (CESC, 2000). Following the first PCEIP publication, *Education Indicators in Canada, 1996* (CESC, 1996), the program was reviewed, in consultation with the provinces

and territories. As a result of these consultations, the PCEIP indicator set and its framework were substantially revised. The INES indicators and the overall approach taken by the INES program were used as a guide in developing the new indicator framework. In many ways, the revised indicator set has been modeled on that of INES, with a similar structure and several common indicators.

The PCEIP publications offer one avenue for linking international and provincial/territorial data. For some indicators, data from INES were reported in *Education Indicators in Canada, 1999* (CESC, 2000), along with data for the provinces and territories, in order to provide an international context. More OECD data will be included in *Education Indicators in Canada, 2003*<sup>2</sup>. The plan is to continue to enhance the harmonization between the INES and PCEIP indicators as much as is practical.

Stronger links between INES and PCEIP at the indicator level could help to address the problem of the lack of comparable provincial/territorial estimates for the INES data. In practice, however, this process is somewhat more complicated than it might first appear. One of the similarities between INES and PCEIP is that both projects involve multiple participants, whose needs and interests can sometimes differ substantially. General direction for CESC projects is provided by the Statistics Council itself, which comprises the Deputy Ministers of Education and the Chief Statistician of Canada. More specific policy direction comes from the Strategic Management Committee, and from the PCEIP Expert Group. A Working Group on Data Quality Improvement provides input into the technical issues relating to the indicators, including the review of the indicator data prior to publication. Consultation and reviews are carried out on a regular basis with these groups. All jurisdictions were involved in the process of developing and reviewing the indicators for *Education Indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program, 1999*, and a similar consultative process was followed for *Education Indicators in Canada, 2003*.

The PCEIP indicator set was designed to respond to the information needs of all the provinces and territories, and the indicator definitions were likewise the subject of consultation and negotiation. Harmonization with the INES indicators will mean adopting slightly different definitions, in some cases, and these changes would need to be acceptable to all Canadian jurisdictions before a final decision can be reached. As noted above, policy makers have indicated that they are

generally supportive of a closer link between INES and PCEIP, but the technical hurdles will take some time to overcome completely. Experience shows that the sometimes lengthy consultation process required to reach a consensus is worthwhile, in the end, however.

At the moment, PCEIP and INES are complementary, but serve somewhat different functions. Respondents to the 1999 survey indicated that the policy use of the data in *Education Indicators in Canada*, the PCEIP publication, is similar to that of *Education at a Glance*. The pan-Canadian indicators were regularly used, for example, in the preparation of briefing notes for Ministers, for purposes of comparison and ranking of a particular jurisdiction against other Canadian jurisdictions, and in response to issues raised by the media and political opposition. In some cases, jurisdictions had passed *Education Indicators in Canada* on to schools in order to provide information about the education system to stakeholders and the public. The pan-Canadian indicators had also stimulated debate within jurisdictions about education policy, by generating ideas and concerns based on observations of what other jurisdictions may or may not be doing. In general, respondents indicated that they made more frequent use of *Education Indicators in Canada* than of *Education at a Glance*, because the jurisdictional-level data were more immediately useful than the overall international context.

Many of the Canadian jurisdictions have their own indicator programs, some of which predate INES. In 1999, several respondents noted that the INES and PCEIP programs had been used as models for developing jurisdictional-level indicator systems.

## **INES in Canada – Future Directions**

### ***Use of Education at a Glance***

In the 1999 survey, the finding that emerged most clearly was that indicators are of the greatest value when they provide information at the primary locus of decision making. The closer the indicators are to the source of policy making, the more useful they are in formulating and influencing policy. Provincial/territorial policy experts have indicated repeatedly that the most relevant indicators are those developed locally, followed by those on a pan-Canadian level, and finally those at an international level. In a decentralized education system such as Canada's, most policy is made at the provincial and territorial level. Canadian-level data, such as those in *Education at a*

*Glance*, are interesting, but their direct usefulness for policy development is limited. In the same way information about education in the European Community as a single entity might be both pertinent and useful in certain contexts, it would not provide education ministries in individual countries with a picture of how their particular education system was functioning. As with *Education at a Glance*, PCEIP indicators that provide information at a "Canadian" level are considered less useful than jurisdictional-level data because Canadian data fail to provide the level of detail required for education policy work in provincial and territorial ministries and departments of education.

Although Canadian policy makers consult indicator information from all three sources – jurisdictional, pan-Canadian, and international – as part of their decision-making process, the indicators that policy makers look to first tend to be those of their own jurisdiction, where available. Pan-Canadian and international indicators are consulted for additional external reference as needed. One of the shortcomings of the INES data reported in *Education at a Glance*, from the Canadian perspective, is the lack of provincial/territorial-level information.

PCEIP offers at least a partial solution, though one that presents certain technical challenges. Another step that CMEC has taken to increase the relevance of *Education at a Glance* is the production of a Highlights or Country Profile document for Canada, sent to senior policy makers in every province and territory shortly before the release of EAG each year. The document outlines the data that are presented for Canada, noting particularly those indicators where Canada is ranked either very high or very low. While this does not address the underlying problem of the lack of comparability at the provincial/territorial level, it has helped policy makers to grasp the overall picture and to make more effective use of the publication. The ability to include provincial/territorial estimates based on the data submitted to OECD would greatly increase the value of the Highlights document. As has been stated, Statistics Canada has these data in their "raw" form, and sends them to OECD. The resources, both in terms of cost and time, required in order to prepare these data at the provincial/territorial level are substantial, however, and must compete with other priorities. To date, it has not been possible to provide this information.

### *Increased Integration of PCEIP and INES*

The plan to increase the integration between the PCEIP and INES indicators will strengthen both programs within Canada. PCEIP will



benefit from the international comparisons that will be available for a greater number of indicators. Policy makers, and education stakeholders generally, will also find INES more useful when more of the indicators can be considered at a provincial/territorial level. This approach will not completely address the issue of provincial/territorial comparability for INES data, however. Timing is one complication: *Education at a Glance* is an annual publication, while *Education Indicators in Canada* is published biennially. It is also unlikely that all the indicators reported in EAG would be included in the Canadian publication, since the aims of INES and PCEIP are not identical. Nevertheless, the ability to provide both international and provincial/territorial information for a central core of indicators will be valuable. As noted above, the harmonization of PCEIP and INES is an ongoing process, involving issues such as the integration of ISCED-level reporting, rather than grade-level, as is currently the case for PCEIP. Planning is under way to make the PCEIP data available through a database, and this may facilitate a more direct comparison for specific INES and PCEIP indicators. It may also help to address the difference in publishing schedules.

### *Dissemination*

One approach to dissemination, which has been considered by the INES National Coordinators, is the preparation of country profiles to complement the information provided in *Education at a Glance*. The country profile would present all the indicator information for a given country as one block, with some data from other countries included to provide comparison points. This would allow the information to be accessed in two ways. In EAG, the reader is given a global picture for each indicator, but has to work painstakingly through the book in order to obtain an overview for an individual country. In the country profiles, the country perspective would be clearer, but the full context of the results for other countries would not be included. As already mentioned, CMEC prepares a version of the country profile for distribution at the time of the annual release of EAG. If this idea is developed further, OECD may wish to consider including subnational information in the country profiles, for those countries that would find this useful. This would add value beyond the information already available in EAG rather than simply repackaging existing data, and would greatly enhance the benefits of the INES data for countries, such as Canada, where many educational decisions are made at a subnational level.

## *Communications and Resource Considerations*

Canada has made a commitment to a regular process of consultation among the various INES representatives, who are scattered across the country. Through a series of teleconferences and face-to-face meetings, network members are able to communicate with their colleagues, share information about emerging issues, and work to develop a position that will best represent Canada. This involves a substantial commitment of time and resources, given Canada's size and linguistic diversity. The result of this consultation process, which has increased over the past two to three years, has been a more coherent understanding of the scope of INES activities among the Canadian network members, and more effective presentations of the Canadian position at INES meetings. Information about INES is made available to ministries and departments of education, through written and verbal updates at meetings, the preparation of the Highlights document, and the posting of information on the CMEC website, such as the INES newsletters. Continuing to maintain these avenues of communication will be important to the continued success of and support for INES in Canada.

Undertaking these measures requires a significant commitment of resources. Much of the work of INES is dependent on the contributions of time and money from OECD member countries. Resources are required to send people to attend meetings, to host meetings in Canada, to hold coordination meetings among the Canadian representatives, to prepare and submit indicator data, to review the draft material for *Education at a Glance* and *Education Policy Analysis*, and to analyze and report on the many documents relating to the work of INES that are produced by the various INES groups. Evolving priorities relating to education issues, and the demand for more and better information, mean that new ideas for indicators are constantly being generated. Each new area needs resources to support the development of indicator measures. In some cases, new surveys or assessments are proposed, or additions to existing surveys suggested. The information that INES provides is important, but it will be essential to continue to evaluate new plans and to re-examine existing commitments in light of the ultimate benefit for policy making. Already, in the area of large-scale assessments, Canadian ministries and departments of education are making choices among the many assessments, due to limited resources. Similar choices are likely to be required about the allocation of money and time to the work of INES as a whole and to individual priorities within the program.

## **The Role and Relevance of INES in Canada**

Respondents to the 1999 survey reported that international indicators were used in several ways for the development of policy. For example, they provided a perspective for the discussion of issues by showing where the jurisdiction stood in relation to similar countries, although the first consideration in making such comparisons was generally the activities of other jurisdictions within Canada. Program-specific indicators, such as those on special education, were useful for generating ideas, indicating areas for further inquiry, and demonstrating the international policy spectrum on a particular issue. International information was used both by politicians and policy makers to provide a broad perspective and benchmark against which to measure policy in an individual jurisdiction. While *Education at a Glance* cannot give a complete picture of education in member countries, it does provide important comparative information that allows judgments and assessments to be made.

### ***Accountability***

Indicators provide a structure for reporting elements of education systems, showing where progress has been made and where attention needs to be focused. One of the primary functions of indicator systems is accountability. In part, this is public accountability. Indicator data allow governments to give concrete results to a sometimes skeptical public. It is far more convincing to provide data that show that more students are completing high school today than ten years ago than simply to state that the education system is doing well. Accountability within governments is also a factor. The past few years have seen a climate of fiscal restraint, and programs need to be demonstrably effective in order to continue to receive funding. In the context of the global economy, accountability has expanded to include questions about how Canada stands relative to the rest of the world. The INES data help policy makers answer those questions.

### ***Conceptualization of Indicators***

One of the most interesting comments from those interviewed in 1999 regarding the role of indicators related to their indirect and "unofficial" impact. Speaking of the preparation and circulation of multiple drafts for a provincial indicator report, one respondent stated that this, in his opinion, was perhaps the most valuable aspect of an indicators program. As people were asked for commentary and

suggestions in relation to the various drafts, their thinking about the education system in general was stimulated and new ideas and questions were raised. The indicators became a part of the conceptualization of the issues, enriching the process and helping to crystallize the thinking around the issues. Similar comments were made with respect to *Education at a Glance*, about the importance of simply circulating it and making people aware of the indicators and concepts it contains.

As this comment makes clear, the value of the *process* also needs to be considered in assessing the relevance of an indicators program. For an indicator to be valid and useful there needs to be a common understanding of what it represents. The process used by PCEIP and OECD is somewhat iterative and may seem to be overly elaborate in the sense that there are often many meetings and multiple drafts. However, this process helps to improve the validity of the indicator set, with the result that the indicator data have greater credibility. The consultation process also helps to create support for the program among stakeholders, because they have participated in its creation and maintenance and know that it reflects their ideas and will respond to their needs.

## Conclusion

Has INES helped Canadian policy makers to assess the effectiveness of their education systems and monitor their evolution? Based on the responses to the 1999 survey and the interest policy makers have shown in the Highlights document, the answer is yes. Although typically other sources, such as provincial/territorial and pan-Canadian indicator information are consulted more frequently, the international perspective is extremely useful.

As INES continues to develop, one of the major issues to be addressed in Canada, and perhaps in other decentralized countries, is how to provide information at a subnational level when that is where most education-related decisions are made. In Canada, the gradual integration of INES data into PCEIP represents one partial approach to resolving this issue. More consideration will be needed in the future, of this and other possibilities for increasing the relevance and usefulness of INES publications such as *Education at a Glance*.

No doubt, the main value of the INES indicators lies in the data and their direct use in the policy context. However, the responses to the

1999 survey suggest that the indicators also provide a useful source of information about approaches to education policy issues adopted by other countries, and an opportunity to look at one's own education system with a fresh eye. In Canada, INES has served as an excellent example to stimulate the development of the pan-Canadian indicator program. Canadian policy makers recognize the increasing relevance of international perspectives for informed decision making about education and the role that INES plays in filling that need.

## NOTES

1. Data are collected from the provinces and territories and submitted to OECD by Statistics Canada.
2. Release of *Education Indicators in Canada, 2003* is planned for November 2003.

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