OVERVIEW:
SECONDARY EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS

Rupert Maclean

The importance of secondary education in a changing world

As countries make strenuous efforts to achieve universal literacy and primary-level education for all, while at the same time expanding and improving the quality of their systems of tertiary education, for many nations secondary education has become the weakest link in the education chain.

As the UNESCO World education report (2000) on 'the right to education' clearly demonstrates, primary education has expanded significantly in many developing countries since the 1950s, and this has resulted in a significant increase in gross enrolment in secondary education. However, as access to secondary education has expanded, its overall quality has often been in decline as resources have been stretched thin and systems have become more inefficient.

There is widespread agreement as to the need for a fundamental re-thinking of the role and place of secondary education as part of the re-engineering of education systems, since most countries recognize the priority of secondary education,

Original language: English

Rupert Maclean (Australia)
Director, UNESCO’s International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Bonn, Germany, since February 2001, before which he was Director, Section for Secondary Education at UNESCO, Paris. Between 1992 and 1999 he was Chief of UNESCO’s Asia-Pacific Centre of Educational Innovation for Development (ACEID), Bangkok, prior to which he was for two years the UNESCO Chief Technical Adviser in Myanmar for a UNDP-funded project on teacher education. Before joining UNESCO, he was a university academic in Australia concerned with teacher education and with the sociology of education. E-mail: r.maclean@unesco.org

Prospects, vol. XXXI, no. 1, March 2001
not only as an indispensable link in the whole education system but also as an area of particular importance to youth. At the World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000, the matter of what happens after primary education was raised as being an important issue in a number of regions where secondary education is now regarded as forming part of basic education. At the Dakar Forum, a Roundtable on ‘After primary education: what?’ discussed the reform of the secondary education curriculum.

In fact, the education of adolescents is a matter which is of considerable concern to developed and developing countries alike. For instance, in a 1999 study the OECD put the proportion of 16- to 19-year-olds not attending school and not employed at 19% in the United Kingdom, 14% in Italy and 13% in Spain.

In addition, major regional and international conferences, such as the 1998 UNESCO-ACEID International Conference on Education, on ‘Secondary Education and Youth at the Crossroads’, have repeatedly stressed the urgent need to upgrade, diversify and expand education at the secondary level in order to respond to the consequences of the expansion of basic education and to challenges posed by rapid changes occurring in society and the world of work.

Overview of current issues and concerns regarding secondary education

A review of the research literature on secondary education reveals that a number of key issues and concerns are emerging regarding the renewal and diversification of secondary education and the education of youth, which many countries are now seeking to address. Put briefly, these are:

1. Secondary education for all? As was stressed at the recent World Education Forum in Dakar, in an increasing number of countries basic education is being redefined to include secondary education, at least at the middle school (junior secondary) level. For many, secondary education is now regarded as part of basic education and EFA.

2. Expanding access: As countries achieve universal primary education, there is pressure to increase opportunities for access to post-primary education for the larger numbers of individuals completing primary education. World-wide, in terms of enrolment ratios, secondary education is the fastest-growing sector of formal education.

3. Reducing drop-out and repeater rates: In many countries, rising enrolments are accompanied by an increase in academic failure, as evidenced by high rates of repeating and drop-out. For example, every year almost a third of pupils in Latin America repeat a grade, which wastes valuable human and financial resources. Action is being taken to overcome this problem through such means as the reform of teacher training, financial assistance to students and their families, and innovative experiments in group work, team teaching and the use of the new information and communication technologies.

4. Equity: There is an increasing emphasis on ensuring that all sections of soci-