ISCED Review Concept Note

November 2008

1. Context

As the awareness of the role of education in developing individuals and in building societies and economies has grown, so has the demand for evidence on the impact of education and on how to improve the performance of national education systems. Policymakers increasingly look to cross-national comparisons to benchmark progress towards goals such as universal basic education and life-long learning. They also use indicators related to the efficacy, equity and efficiency of educational systems in other countries to inform their own efforts to enhance learning outcomes.

In response to this demand, UNESCO designed the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) in the 1970s to serve as an instrument for assembling, compiling and presenting education statistics both nationally and internationally. The ISCED was the first framework created to facilitate comparisons of education indicators across countries. It was approved at the International Conference on Education (Geneva, 1975), and referred to as ISCED 76.[1]

By the mid-1990s, however, it was felt that improvements were needed to the ISCED classification to better capture new developments in education systems. As a result, the international community undertook to improve the conceptual framework and its implementation. These revisions were endorsed at the UNESCO General Conference at its 29th session in November 1997 and ISCED 97 was introduced.

The revised ISCED 1997 classification reflected more diverse forms of vocational education and training, new types of education and learning providers, the growing trend of distance education and new technologies. While ISCED encompasses a variety of programmes and types of education,[2] subsequent revisions have focused mainly on organised learning.

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[1] It was subsequently endorsed by UNESCO's General Conference (Paris, 1978).
[2] ISCED covers formal education, non-formal education, continuing education, distance education, open-education, life-long education, part-time education, apprenticeship, vocational training, etc.

Although ISCED retained its two main axes for cross-classification - levels and fields of education - there were some modifications to the framework. The number of levels of education was reduced from 8 to 7. It included a new level (ISCED 4) to cover programmes which overlapped between upper secondary and tertiary education. Tertiary education was divided into two levels instead of three. The fields of education were increased to cover 25 categories compared to 21 in ISCED 76.

Upon the endorsement of ISCED 1997, the international agencies responsible for compiling international education statistics data prioritized the implementation of the revised classification. These efforts have included regional education statistics workshops organized by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), manuals and other materials produced by the OECD and Eurostat as well as ISCED-specific discussions during their annual education statistics meetings. The ISCED underpins the international education statistics produced by UIS, OECD and Eurostat, including efforts to monitor global progress towards Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In the 2000s, the international agencies collaborated to identify and resolve issues that arose during the implementation of ISCED 1997. At the UNESCO General Conference in October 2007, national authorities expressed their desire for the UIS to re-evaluate the ISCED in the view of the changes that have taken place since the 1997 revision.[3] The UIS will present recommendations for improving the conceptual framework of ISCED and its implementation for approval by the UNESCO General Conference in 2011.

2. Rationale

After 10 years in use, the need to take a closer look at the ISCED has again become a priority. National authorities feel that ISCED should be updated to reflect major changes in the educational systems and address difficulties related to its implementation, with special attention to higher education. The international agencies have also identified a number of issues related to the conceptual framework and its implementation both at the regional and global level.

Among the most common implementation problems faced by countries in mapping their system to the international standard are:
- A tendency to classify institutions instead of the programmes provided (e.g. Vocational Training Centers provide ISCED 4 and ISCED 5B programmes)
- Assigning programmes to an ISCED level based on the name similarity between national education programmes and ISCED levels (e.g. "Post-secondary education programmmes" may actually include programmes offered at Junior Colleges, Institutes of Technical Education, Polytechnics, Institutes of Vocational Education, Teacher colleges).
- While the ISCED 4 category bears the label "post-secondary non tertiary education", this does not mean that all programmes in these institutions should be classified in ISCED 4.

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[3] Unesco 34C/DR.25

- Early childhood programmes may be combined, and include those that do not meet the criteria for the ISCED 0 level (pre-primary education).

There are also a range of conceptual issues that need to be addressed, including further clarification of existing definitions. Some conceptual problems may need a more extensive review and additional research.

Among the issues that require a more in-depth evaluation are:

- the classification of vocational or technical education programmes of two years (or more) in duration that can be entered upon graduation from upper secondary education is a good example of the need to further clarify the current classification criteria for ISCED levels 4 (Post-secondary non-tertiary education) and 5B (First stage of tertiary education which does not lead to an advanced research qualification and which may be specific to a profession). Further work is needed to better differentiate between these two levels so that countries can assign them accurately to either level and in a consistent way across countries.

- the current definition of ISCED 4 is vague and employs terms such as 'straddling the boundary" and 'not significantly more advanced' to define programmes classified at this level. The lack of clarity in its definition has led to the inclusion of many types of programmes at this level including: vocational programmes or institutions considered as post-secondary in the country in question, pre-university programmes that are followed by very few students graduating from secondary schools to have access to tertiary education, programmes for adults who wish to return to university and programmes delivered in institutions perceived as 'separate' from the regular education system.

- changes in the structure of the educational systems, such as the extension of basic education to ISCED 0 (pre-primary) or ISCED 3 (upper secondary).

- the restructuring of early childhood educational programmes that challenges the current view of what constitutes 'education' at the ISCED 0 level.

- changes in higher education in Europe may not be reflected accurately in the current tertiary levels (ISCED 5 and 6).

Untangling implementation problems from conceptual issues is a necessary yet challenging task as is illustrated by the changes in the higher education in Europe. Ongoing discussions on this issue have focused on deciding whether to resolve these issues through better implementation of the current ISCED criteria (ISCED 5A and 5B), through a new structure of ISCED or through changes in the data collection instruments.

3. Review strategy

The review will comprise four main activities:

1. *Determine the scope of the review.*

The scope of the review will be based on issues that have been identified through discussions with regional stakeholders and partner organizations such as OECD and Eurostat. Thus, during this exploratory stage, work will examine current definitions and classification criteria and determine if revisions to the overall structure or new conceptual definitions are necessary. To this end, the UIS will form an ISCED Technical Advisory Panel to provide guidance on the review strategy, to take part in consultations, assist in targeting research, as well as to assist in the preparation of the recommendations.

The Technical Advisory Panel will reflect a diverse composition, e.g., geographical representation, familiarity with ISCED and its use, experience with education statistics, knowledge on curriculum content across countries.

2. *Conduct regional and expert consultations for the production of draft recommendations.*

Regional and expert technical consultations are a crucial stage in this process as it is only through the understanding of regional needs and the active role of experts that the full breath of issues can be addressed. Emerging issues since 1997 include the spread of the "Basic Education" concept, greater focus on structured early childhood education, higher levels of required teaching qualifications and more flexibility for adult learning. These issues, and others raised in the context of regional consultations, will require the expertise and advice of domain specialists so that sound recommendations on improvements to the ISCED can be made.

A first regional meeting took place in September 2008. Before the motion for a review of ISCED was accepted by the UNESCO General Conference in November 2007, UIS, OECD and Eurostat had already convened to organize this seminar to discuss issues to improve the comparability of international education statistics as well as to define this region's contribution to the Review. The result of the discussions are as follows: need a better definition of the tertiary education levels (mostly 5A and 5B programmes) and ISCED level 4 (post-secondary non-tertiary education); need to clarify the difference between orientation and destination for the classification of programmes and their pertinence at each level (ISCED 2, 3 and 4); need to update the definition of educational attainment used for international purposes and the need to further develop the classification of non-formal education programmes.

Other regional meetings will be carried out in collaboration with UNESCO Regional Offices and a wide range of regional experts and stakeholders. Discussions will aim to ensure that any proposed recommendations respond to regional needs. In addition to identifying existing problems, these meetings will explore regional educational reforms and changes in the structure of the educational systems since

1997 that could affect their representation in the ISCED framework. The meetings will also address any other emerging issues. Experts from the ISCED Technical Advisory Panel will be invited to take part in these regional meetings.

3. *An interim progress report will be distributed and reviewed at the UNESCO General Conference in 2009; formal consultation of Member States and validation of final recommendations; adopt recommendations during the UNESCO General Conference in 2011.*

It is expected that an interim report will provide an assessment of the implications of the changes proposed to the ISCED classification as well as their feasibility in terms of implementation.

The proposal for the review or revision of ISCED will be sent for formal consultation to all Member States and partner organizations prior to its submission for approval to the UNESCO General Conference in 2011.

4. *Communicate results.*

The key to the success of this process is to have an efficient communication strategy. To this end, the UIS will carry out the following initiatives:

- present ongoing ISCED review work at international meetings such as the World Conference on Higher Education, the UNSD Classification meetings and in other fora;
- establish an ISCED website where information on ongoing activities will be made available on a regular basis;
- global dissemination of the final recommendations to inform users on the implications of these changes for the international comparability of education statistics.

4. Expected outputs and timeline

2008
a) A document(s) summarizing all issues (resolved and unresolved) along with a recommendation for possible topics for the review and regional consultations. This will be circulated among countries, experts and international agencies.

b) Commission papers on key issues identified in this above-mentioned summary document(s).

The *UIS welcomes offers of collaboration in the production of in-depth technical papers on key areas of ISCED that will feed into the review process*.

These will be linked to regional meetings and to the ISCED Technical Advisory Panel, who will also be asked to help guide the selection of key issues.

   c) Draft Agenda for regional ISCED meetings to be held in 2009.

   d) First meeting of the ISCED Technical Advisory Panel.

2009

   a) Publish interim progress report.

   b) Conduct regional meetings: publish reports documenting meeting results; submit to the ISCED Technical Advisory Panel.

   c) Compile draft recommendations.

   d) Present ISCED review work on tertiary education in a panel at the World Conference in Higher Education and the UNSD Classification meeting.

2010

   a) Formal world-wide consultation among Member States and partner organizations.

   b) Process results of the formal consultation and production of final draft.

   c) Validation of the final recommendations by the ISCED Technical Advisory Panel.

2011

   a) Translation of the final recommendations.

   b) Submit for approval at the General Conference in Fall 2011.

   c) Communication of recommendations to Member States.