A. INTRODUCTION

The quality of education and training is considered in all Member States to be a concern of the highest political priority. High levels of knowledge, competencies and skills are considered to be the very basic conditions for active citizenship, employment and social cohesion. Lifelong learning is an important means of shaping one's future on a professional and personal level, and high-quality education is essential in the light of labour market policies, and the free movement of workers within the European Union.

It is stated in Article 149 of the EC Treaty that 'the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their actions while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of educational systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity'. The Education Council has debated this subject on numerous occasions. A number of conclusions and resolutions have been adopted, inviting Member States and the Commission to initiate cooperation in the field. In the Council resolution of 26 November 1999, Ministers of Education identified the quality of education as one of the priority issues for consideration under the new cooperation model of the 'Rolling agenda'.

Under the Community action programme Socrates, quality of education is the key objective of the programme actions. Quality of education has thus been a priority issue for analysis, and a number of studies and research projects have been launched with a view to strengthening cooperation at European level in the field. These initiatives have paved the way for the pilot project on quality evaluation in school education which was implemented in 101 secondary schools across Europe in 1997/98. Based on the results of the pilot scheme, the Commission adopted in January 2000 a proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on 'European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education', based on Article 149 and 150 of the Treaty.

The need for cooperation in the field of quality evaluation was equally underlined at the conference, held in Prague in June 1998, of the Education Ministers of the European Union and of the 11 acceding countries as well the Education Ministers from the three non-associated countries of central and eastern Europe participating as observers. The Education Ministers from the 26 participating countries invited the Commission to establish a working committee of national experts designated by the Ministers with a view to agreeing a 'limited number of indicators or benchmarks for school standards to assist national evaluation of systems'. A working group consisting of experts of 26 European countries was subsequently set up in February 1999 ([2]).

Two progress reports were prepared by the Commission. The first report, containing the basic criteria for the

([2]) The list is also available on the Internet (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/indic/membersen.html).

selection of indicators, was presented to the European Ministers of Education, in Budapest, in June 1999. The second report, setting out a preliminary outline of the indicators to be considered, was submitted to the Education Council at the meeting on 26 November 1999. ([3])

This *European report on the quality of school education* is based on the 16 indicators which were selected by the working group in cooperation with the Commission. These indicators cover four broad areas: attainment levels; educational success and transition; monitoring of school education; and educational resources and structures.

The Commission envisages submitting this report to the Education Council under Portuguese Presidency (8 June 2000) and to the Conference of European Education Ministers to be held in Bucharest (18 to 20 June 2000). The report will constitute a key element of the 'Rolling agenda' of the Education Council in the field of quality of education. The Commission's intention is to update and to complement the selected indicators on a regular basis.

The *European report on the quality of school education* represents the Commission's first response to the conclusions of the special European Council meeting in Lisbon on 23 and 24 March 2000. At this meeting the Union set itself the strategic target of becoming the most competitive economy in the world capable of sustainable growth, with more, higher quality jobs and greater social cohesion. Achieving this goal requires an overall strategy aimed at preparing the development of the knowledge-based economy and a strategy designed to modernise the European social model by investing in people and by combating social exclusion.

At the core of this strategic reorientation of priorities, the conclusions of the Lisbon European Summit (March 2000) recognised the essential role of education and training in moving towards the goal of full employment through the development of the knowledge economy. The European Council clearly identified the need to set quantifiable targets, indicators and benchmarks as a means of comparing best practice and as instruments for monitoring and reviewing the progress achieved.

The Commission is convinced that this first *European report on the quality of school education* will contribute a European dimension to the shared knowledge pool available for educational policy-making. The Commission hopes that the report will foster cooperation across Europe and stimulate a wide ranging debate among all stakeholders on quality policies of education.

PRESENTATION OF THE 16 INDICATORS

The 16 indicators on quality of school education selected by the working committee of national experts provide a complementary set of information, which begins to paint a picture of quality in European schools.

The 16 indicators are shown in the table below:

AREA	INDICATOR
Attainment	1. Mathematics 2. Reading 3. Science 4. Information and communication technologies (ICT) 5. Foreign languages 6. Learning to learn 7. Civics
Success and transition	8. Drop out 9. Completion of upper secondary education 10. Participation in tertiary education
Monitoring of school education	11. Evaluation and steering of school education 12. Parental participation
Resources and Structures	13. Education and training of teachers 14. Participation in pre-primary education 15. Number of students per computer 16. Educational expenditure per student

([3]) The two progress reports can be found on the Internet (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/indic/backen.html).

The indicators fall into four areas:

1. Attainment.

In this area are seven indicators of attainment which are seen as critical for all European countries in the present and for the future. In some fields — 'mathematics', 'reading', 'science' — data already exist. To some degree this reflects the relative ease of measurement in these curricular areas. At the other end of the spectrum 'learning to learn' is an indicator covering a much less easily measurable set of skills but nonetheless critical for an unpredictable social and economic future where no comparable data is presently available. In between are subjects such as 'civics', for which little data as yet exists, and 'foreign languages', which has also still to be developed. 'Information and communication technology' (ICT) is also included in this attainment set because, although little good data currently exists, it will be a key indicator in years to come. All of these areas of attainment remain important goals for the future.

2. Success and transition.

Into this area fall three indicators of highly significant policy relevance. They are closely inter-related — 'drop-out rate from school', 'completion of upper secondary education' and 'participation in tertiary education'.

3. Monitoring of school education.

Two indicators currently fall into this area. These are 'evaluation and steering of school education' and 'parental participation'. Both are concerned with stakeholder participation where heads of schools, teachers, students and parents are key stakeholders, consumers of information and active players in school improvement.

4. Resources and structures.

This category includes four indicators, each concerned with key aspects of infrastructure which underpin school performance and pupil success. These are 'educational expenditure per student', 'education and training of teachers', 'participation rates in pre-primary education' and 'number of students per computer'.

USING INDICATORS AND BENCHMARKS IN POLICY-MAKING

It is through graphical portrayal of similarities and differences between countries that indicators and benchmarks truly come into their own. This allows countries to learn from one another through comparison of both common interests and shared differences. The aim of benchmarks is not to set standards or targets, but rather to provide policy-makers with reference points. Benchmarks are used to identify issues which need to be investigated further, and to suggest alternative routes to policy goals.

As an example we might look at existing data on the use of ICT in schools.

Why choose 'ICT attainment' as indicator for quality of education?

This topic is selected because ICT is of the most critical policy relevance. It is already having far-reaching effects on people's lives and children's learning, with, for example, 40 % of all UK market shares in ICT.

Why choose data on 'the use of ICT in schools'?

The indicator selected is simply one of many. It compares countries' approaches to the use of ICT as a curricular subject and/or as a generic tool. While the data are limited in how much they reveal, they provide an introduction to policy discussion by raising a number of questions about the future place, purpose and practice of ICT in European schools. For example:

- Which is better — to teach ICT as a subject in its own right or to use it as a tool across all subjects?
- What does this mean for the education of teachers — specialist skills or generic skills?
- What are the demands of the labour market — for high level specialists (e.g., programmers) or young people with broad computer literacy?

And looking to the immediate and longer-term future:

- What are the cost benefits of alternative forms of provision? How much of learning can be independent, teacher-led, peer group-led, or home, school, or community based?

All the indicators lead into a number of different policy areas and into the examination of promising practices that already exist within Europe. Within each of the indicator areas in this document, examples of such practices are illustrated. They suggest what can be done with imagination and commitment. For instance, within ICT, examples are given of interesting initiatives in Estonia and Sweden. The Swedish example covers a number of key areas, including teacher education and student resourcing, but carries significant cost implications. The Estonian example, on the other hand, suggests innovative ways of using hidden resources (school students) to actually minimise costs and simultaneously raise achievement. So, indicators lead to benchmarks, to issues and questions and thence to examples of practice which provide a focus for policy development in every European country.

FROM DATA TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

In this report, each of the 16 indicators is presented in sequence, which does not represent an order of priority. In some cases data is long-standing and well-researched. In some, data is new and less well tested. In others there is no data available as yet but the indicator is included as an area of important emerging policy issues.

In all cases, however, comparability has to be approached with caution and an open mind. Even the most robust of data conceal historical and cultural differences and value systems. National goals and priorities differ and will continue to differ but much may still be learned from innovative practice and new and different approaches to old problems.

So, promising or interesting examples of what is happening across Europe are presented to stimulate discussion further and to illustrate principles which may be transferable across countries. Some examples of practice go well beyond the parameters of the associated indicator but in so doing illustrate the potential of the data to make a difference both at policy level and in school or classroom practice.