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Book reviews: Advancing global education: Patterns of potential human progress

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Advancing global education: Patterns of potential human progress Vol. 2, by Janet R. Dickson, Barry B. Hughes, and Mohammad T. Irfan, Boulder and Oxford, New Delhi, Paradigm, 2010, 333 pp. (electronic version: <http://www.ifs.du.edu/documents/index.aspx>), US\$49.95 (paperback), US\$150.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-59451-755-6

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This book utilizes the free and publicly available ‘International Futures’ (www.ifs.du.edu) global modeling software to forecast student enrollment numbers at primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary levels of education for 183 countries from the year 2005 to 2060. The projections cover both an ‘exploratory’ base case based on global experience since 1960 as well as a ‘normative’ scenario incorporating modest policy adjustments to accelerate the expansion of schooling.

Developed by a distinguished team of analysts at the University of Denver’s Pardee Center for International Futures, it is the second volume in a seminal series of comprehensive reports producing long-range forecasts on global poverty, education, health, infrastructure, and governance. Although the education forecasts rely on a complex integrated model including economic, demographic, agricultural, energy, technology, environmental, health, and political factors, the three primary variables predicted to drive school enrollment forecasts beyond the existing stock of adults’ (parental) education attainment are per capita income levels, fertility rates, and government education expenditures.

Overall, the projections are optimistic about the expansion of education at all levels due to expected increases in economic growth and declining fertility. Although universal primary education looks unattainable in 2015, it may be possible in 2045. The base-case scenario envisions near universal literacy and gender parity in primary and secondary education as well as a 90% global lower secondary gross enrollment rate by mid-century. The prediction is that enrollment will expand in an ‘s-curve’ pattern whereby (a) initially enrollments grow slowly, (b) then accelerate more quickly, but finally (c) slow down again with the challenges of including the final 10%. Progress is expected to be uneven, however, and the regions currently most behind (sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia) will be the last to universalize basic education.

A major policy finding of the forecasts is that it overwhelmingly pays to invest in education both economically and socially. Although many studies support a similar conclusion, in this case it is well-supported by a large body of quantitative data and a sophisticated modeling effort projecting five decades into the future. Like Ranis, Stewart, and Ramirez (2000), it envisions a virtuous cycle between human capital and economic growth but finds that significant investment in the former is essential to sustain the cycle. Interestingly, by mid-century male gaps may significantly exceed female gaps in education while as many as one out of four adults globally may partake in tertiary education.

The book presents an impressive compilation of statistical data at the cutting edge of rigorous MDG analysis. Yet it is also very accessible to the general reader. Following nine chapters of analysis are almost 200 pages of regional and national data tables with detailed projections from 2010 to 2060. This makes it an excellent reference on the level of UNESCO’s Education for All reports but considerably more forward-looking. An additional strength is that the report synthesizes major trends from 1960 to 2005 that will be of major interest to those seeking an overview of how school enrollment has evolved to the present.

This is a book where the strengths outnumber the weaknesses. There are, however, a few spaces left open for future analysis. Firstly, the book deals more with the quantity of student enrollment, survival, and grade completion than the quality of education received or the impact of inputs such as teacher training, curriculum development, and educational assessment. The study also does not forecast the extent to which private (non-governmental) provision and financing of education may expand (or contract). Additionally, the volume lacks a detailed theoretical or empirical explanation of why some countries allocate more or less public expenditures into education. Wealthier countries clearly have more resources to do so, but issues left open to explore include the roles of (a) state capacity in collecting tax revenues to finance compulsory education; (b) political ideologies that prioritize public expenditure on education; and (c) improvements in the quality of education administration that minimize waste and maximize learner achievement.

These minor omissions aside, the report provides a tremendous service to the global education community. One of many important issues it brings to the fore is the often under-emphasized connection between the 'education transition' from child labor to compulsory schooling and 'demographic transition' of falling mortality and fertility with the observation that education becomes much more affordable as the ratio of children to working-age adults decreases. The last two chapters consider multiple impacts of education expansion on economic development, demography, and sociopolitical change finding that although it may take a generation or two to reap the benefits of education it is well worth it. For its prescient analysis, sophisticated coverage, and vast compilation of data, this book will be essential reading for anyone concerned with the long-term global expansion of education.

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Reference

1. Ranis, Gustav, Stewart, Frances and Ramirez, Alejandro. 2000. Economic growth and human development. *World Development*, 28(2): 197–219.