

Recalling the origins of Unesco's International Institute for Educational Planning¹

by Philip H. Coombs

The opportunity to contribute to this festschrift finally spurred me on to record some personal recollections about the unusual origins of Unesco's International Institute for Educational Planning. I chose this topic partly because it concerns a significant slice of world educational history that has not yet been adequately documented, but additionally because the hero of this festschrift was also an important hero of the IIEP in its early years.

A few preliminary caveats are in order. First, there are significant gaps in the story that follows because I can only testify to those events that I personally experienced or observed or on which I have access to reliable documentation (which unfortunately is scarce). Second, although I have tried hard to avoid errors, there may well be some inadvertent ones because I have had to rely heavily on my memory and we all know that memories sometimes play tricks and that different people sometimes remember the same event quite differently.

So tighten your seat belts and off we'll fly to that extraordinary decade of educational euphoria – the 1960s that gave birth to the IIEP in 1963.

Education's Vintage Decade

It is doubtful that the IIEP could have been created – at least in the unique form that it was, or with such general enthusiasm – in any recent decade other than the 1960s.

In this unusual early postwar decade (as any one old enough to have known Beeb as Ambassador to France will remember) a conjunction of unprecedented forces produced enormous educational consequences. Chief among these forces were: (1) a 'revolution of rising expectations' on the part of common people everywhere, who viewed schooling as the one sure-fire upward mobility route for their children; (2) an unprecedented worldwide population explosion that made schools run fast just to stand still; and (3) the popular new thesis among economists (by then the high priests of national development) that 'increased investment in education is essential for national economic growth'. The net effect of these combined forces was to shatter all previous records around the world for the annual growth of educational enrolments, and to send national education budgets soaring in most countries at two to three times the annual rate of growth of the GNP and the overall national budget.

¹ This article was originally prepared for a series of six booklets, *The Beeby Fascicles*, published in 1992 to commemorate Dr. C.E. Beeby's 90th birthday. Among the posts held by Beeby during his long career were New Zealand's Director of Education, Unesco's Assistant Director-General for Education, and New Zealand's Ambassador to France. Beeby died in 1998 at the age of 95.

These trends seemed very encouraging for education at the time, until it turned out later that they had planted the seeds for a worldwide educational crisis that started becoming visible by the end of the 1960s and proceeded to intensify thereafter, right into the 1990s.

Setting the Stage for an Educational Planning Institute

The famous Washington Conference on *Economic Growth and Investment in Education* convened by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in October 1961 set a number of us thinking for the first time about the need for some sort of international research and training institute for educational planning. It was the first time that leading western economists, including top government economists, had publicly asserted in unison that education was not simply a consumption good but an essential investment in national economic (and social) development in every nation, rich or poor. The conference also underscored the necessity of rational educational planning to ensure the efficient and effective allocation and utilization of scarce educational resources.

Because of my position in the early Kennedy Administration (in the newly created position of Assistant Secretary of State for International Educational and Cultural Affairs), I served as the official host of this trend-setting OECD Conference and chaired most of its sessions (in the Brookings Institution). At the end of a morning devoted to educational planning I lunched with two key OECD staff members and two Unesco observers and continued the unfinished discussion of educational planning. We readily agreed that while effective educational planning was undoubtedly needed, the real problem was that few if any people knew how to do it, at least in the OECD countries (with the partial exception of France).

This led to a spontaneous proposal for action: namely, that the OECD and Unesco should jointly sponsor the creation of an independent international research and training institution that would promote the development and application of appropriate planning concepts and techniques that could be adapted to the differing circumstances of various countries throughout the world. All OECD and Unesco members of the luncheon group agreed to promote this idea with their respective higher officials when they returned to Paris.

Unesco Takes the Initiative

Considerable time went by with nothing but dead silence from both Paris organizations. Finally, however, I received a message from René Maheu, the able and politically astute Director-General of Unesco whom I had come to know in Paris and at regional conferences in Africa and Latin America. The message invited me to join a small advisory group in Paris to help design a possible Unesco-sponsored international institute for educational planning. There was no mention of OECD's cooperation.

I do not know to this day what prompted Maheu to take this initiative, whether it was the proposal hatched at our Washington OECD luncheon or a similar idea coming from one or more other sources. But that did not matter. What did matter was that serious thought was now being given by a major international agency to creating a new institution to promote the much needed development and dissemination of practical concepts and techniques of educational planning.

I was convinced that the need was clearly urgent and growing, in both developed and developing nations but especially in the latter. I had talked about their major problems with educational leaders of many of these countries at the Unesco regional conferences at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and Santiago-de-Chile, and on earlier Ford Foundation missions I had examined educational needs in such Asian countries as India, Burma, Thailand and Indonesia. I was certainly no expert on the matter, but I had also encountered bilateral technical assistance education missions from various western nations and was worried both about the absence of any well-conceived educational plans to guide their efforts, and even more worried about the strong tendency of each such foreign mission to 'sell' the host donor country (which often clearly didn't fit).

Because of other commitments I was unable to attend the advisory group meetings Maheu had invited me to at Unesco, but I was sufficiently interested to send a personal representative with specific written suggestions regarding some of the major features it seemed to me the new institute should have. In terms of Unesco's customary organizational forms and procedures these would probably be viewed as 'radical' suggestions, but they nevertheless seemed to me essential to the success of a new research and training institute in the complex and multi-disciplinary field of educational planning and development.

Among the suggestions, for example, were: (1) the urgent need for relevant research to develop educational planning into a viable field of practical action; (2) the importance of guaranteeing the institute's intellectual autonomy against any external interference; (3) to these ends the new institute should have its own governing board, with power to select the Director and approve senior staff members; and to select the annual programme and budget and such special research and training activities as the Director might recommend; (4) the institute should be free to seek and accept special grants and other forms of support from other UN agencies, individual Member States, private foundations or any other appropriate source, to supplement such operating funds as Unesco might be willing and able to provide.

The reports I received back from the Paris meeting indicated that the outside advisors were all thinking along similar lines and hence welcomed my suggestions. The only serious negative reactions came from a senior member of the Secretariat who represented the Director-General at the meeting. Not surprisingly, as a seasoned Unesco hand he stoutly apposed the notion of endowing this proposed Unesco creation with intellectual or any other form of autonomy or providing it with its own powerful Governing Board, thus shielding it against any proper intervention and control by members of the Secretariat of its parent organization. He also saw no need for research to be an important activity of the new institute, arguing that its main function should be simply to train as quickly as possible a large number of educational planning experts for developing countries and some additional ones to serve as Unesco technical assistance experts.²

² On a later occasion when I was confronted with this same demand from the Secretariat, I observed that it was comparable to demanding that Galileo conduct a course on Solid State Physics one week after he dropped the ball off the Leaning Tower of Pisa. (That seemed to put a stop to the unrealistic demand.)

A Puzzling Request

I waited with interest to learn which model of the proposed new institute Unesco's Director-General would go for - the 'radical' version supported by the outside advisors or the 'anaemic one' advocated by his representative from the Secretariat. Time passed without any answer, but eventually I received a very perplexing message from René Maheu asking if I would be willing to come to Paris and personally present the proposal to create an international institute for educational planning to Unesco's forthcoming General Conference for its approval.

Two questions puzzled me: Which version of the proposed institute does he have in mind? And why is he not presenting it himself in keeping with the customary protocol, instead of asking an outsider like myself to present it?

As to the first question, I concluded that the Director-General must certainly be familiar with the 'radical' proposals I had sent to the meeting of the advisory group, and he certainly would not expect me to advocate some watered down version at the General conference.

Reading his mind on the second question was more difficult, for I knew René Maheu to be on the one hand a skilful political tactician, but on the other to be a stickler for adhering to 'correct' procedures in the formalistic tradition of French administration. The only rational conclusion I could draw was that he privately favoured the 'radical' model but preferred to have some potentially persuasive outsider like myself - a member of the popular Kennedy Administration with combined economic and educational credentials and well known to be a strong supporter of assistance to developing countries - to take on 'the selling job'.

The Big Decision

Hoping that I had read the tea leaves correctly, I headed for Paris and quickly checked in with René Maheu. It was clear that he endorsed the need for research and was prepared to support the 'radical' model of a new IIEP that would guarantee its 'intellectual autonomy'. His interesting rationale was that, since the new institute was to be devoted to research and training, it would require by definition 'intellectual autonomy' - just like a university. It would also need international diplomatic status, however, and the simplest and quickest way to achieve this would be to tie it administratively to Unesco.

His 'soundings' had encouraged him to expect broad support for the new institute in the General Conference. He also had reason, he said, to hope that the World Bank and Ford Foundation would provide substantial initial grants to help this institute get started, though this would apparently depend on who the initial Director and governing board members would be. (In my opinion these grants were conditional on setting up the IIEP at arms' length from Unesco's bureaucratic machinery).

Yet another bright possibility, he said, was that the French Government would offer to become the official host of the new institute (i.e. provide it with appropriate physical facilities) if the General Conference approved locating it in France.³

The one worrisome cloud on the horizon that was troubling Maheu, was the persistent rumour that the Soviet delegation intended to oppose the proposed new institute. By good fortune I happened to have good personal relations with the chief of the Soviet delegation. Shortly after I had become Assistant Secretary of State (and neophyte diplomat) he and I under the very tense circumstances of the 'Berlin Crisis' had successfully negotiated not only an extension but a substantial enlargement of the US-Soviet Exchange Agreement (which we strongly agreed was in the long-term interests of both our nations).

I sent a message inviting him (and his interpreter) to join me for a drink later that afternoon in a pleasant small hotel near Unesco. They arrived at the designated hour and it was a cordial reunion, our first since we had worked together in Washington. I quickly explained that I was anxious to talk with him about something important, not as a US official, however, but as a temporary consultant to the Director-General of Unesco who had requested me to explain to the General Conference the next day the proposal to create an international institute for educational planning, and why this was so important for developing nations.

I observed that since the Soviet Union was almost unique in its considerable experience with educational planning it could be of valuable help to the new international institute, not simply by supporting its creation and encouraging others to do so but later on by enabling the institute to examine the lessons of Soviet experience with educational planning.

His response was cautious but encouraging. He said the Soviet government would be willing to send some experts to Paris to explain to the new institute's staff how educational planning works in the Soviet Union. At the risk of defeating my purpose, I replied that this would not be sufficient. Though I obviously could not speak for the institute's future Director, whoever he might be, it would surprise me if he did not insist on sending an international research team to examine Soviet educational planning at first hand. My Soviet friend paused, then smiled and said that possibly this could be arranged.

In my presentation to the General Conference the next day I explained in a straightforward way why educational planning had become so essential, especially for developing countries, and what I considered to be the essential conditions in order for the proposed new International Institute for Educational Planning to function successfully. Thereafter some delegates asked a few questions for clarification and quite a few took the floor to comment favourably on the proposal. The French Minister of Education then rose to state that his Government would be pleased to provide facilities for the new institute if the General Conference decided to locate it in France.

³ Interestingly, later on when I asked the Rockefeller Foundation to borrow its Villa Serbellone at Lake Como for an IIEP conference on priority research needs in educational planning, the President readily agreed but then asked if I wouldn't like to be given this very attractive facility as IIEP's permanent home. I politely declined, as I had earlier when the French Government offered the old NATO headquarters outside of Paris, with spacious meeting rooms and dormitory and eating facilities. I thanked them cordially but explained (a) that I had not come to France to run a hotel and (b) the new institute had to be readily accessible to foreign visitors to Paris.

When the voting finally took place the Soviet delegation broke the suspense and made it unanimous.

The Crucial Negotiation

Later that day I finally learned why René Maheu had asked me to present the proposal to the General Conference and how naïve I had been in not catching on sooner. He took me aside, congratulated and thanked me on my presentation and on the unanimous vote, then said, 'Some day many people will claim to be the real father of this new institute. But you and I know who the real father is and you must therefore be its first Director'.

I was shocked, befuddled and overwhelmed for this possibility had truly never crossed my mind. I thanked him cordially, but then found myself saying words to this effect, 'If the members of the Governing Board of this Institute are to have real authority, then only they can choose the Director; the Charter of the Institute must make this and a number of other important powers of the Board and the Director perfectly clear'. He smiled knowingly and nodded approval, then quickly invited me to draft the charter and the administrative regulations the way I wanted them. With these assurances, and given my strong belief in the importance and potential of this new institute, I could hardly any longer decline the opportunity.

We then discussed and agreed to the desirable structure and composition of the Governing Board, which would be another major innovation in terms of past Unesco practices. We agreed: (1) that the membership should be kept relatively small; (2) that in order to build strong cooperative links with other UN agencies having important educational and training concerns, Unesco, the World Bank, and the UNDP would each have a permanent ex-officio seat on the Board while a third 'rotating seat' would be shared by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), and the World Health Organization (WHO), and a second rotating seat shared by the UN Regional Institutes for Economic and Social Planning. Five other seats would be for 'elected members' with limited terms and be geographically distributed among individuals chosen for their outstanding personal records of performance in fields relating to the Institute's concerns. The Board itself would elect these 'non-institutional' members and the Chairman would be one of them. However, to get the Institute started, the Director-General of Unesco would need to designate the initial non-institutional 'elected' members.

I had to get back to Washington to reorganize my own and my family's life, and since this would take considerable time I set 1 May 1963 as my target date for returning to Paris to prepare for the Institute's launching, and mid-July for the first meeting of the Governing Board.

The Realities of Starting an Institute

My principal objective in this paper was to describe, as best I could how the IIEP was created. That aim was achieved, for better or for worse, in the previous pages and perhaps I should stop right here. But this would be somewhat frustrating because that creation was only on

paper; the real tasks of creation lay ahead. However, there is not sufficient remaining space to do more than touch lightly on a few highlights of this complex process.

I arrived back in Paris early in the morning of 1 May 1963 and found the whole city, including Unesco, closed down for Labour Day. Practically the only people in sight were little old ladies trying to sell me a bunch of lilies-of-the-valley.

The next day I visited Unesco and was shown three quite adequate basement rooms that would be the IIEP's temporary quarters until we could find something more adequate.

I settled behind a desk and made a list of 'SIX BIG JOBS' that had to be done, more simultaneously than sequentially. The list read:

JOB ONE: Draft the Institute's Basic Charter and its Personnel and Financial Regulations; review these with the designated Chairman of the Governing Board, Sir Sidney Caine, Director of the London School of Economics.

JOB TWO: Recruit an initial staff, not a very big one but a highly competent and well-balanced one. Assume a reasonable staff turnover to ensure a steady flow of fresh ideas; plan to supplement the regular staff with able visiting scholars and experts.

JOB THREE: Locate satisfactory permanent facilities, preferably on the Right Bank – a safe distance from Unesco House on the Left Bank. (P.S. Also find a home for the Coombs family who will be arriving soon).

JOB FOUR: Organize a Lean Budget, economizing wherever possible (e.g. economy flights for everyone, including Board Members and the Director and senior staff); avoid any standard Unesco fringe benefits we don't really need (e.g. official cars, generous separation grants to departing staff members to tide them over while looking for a job). Start identifying potential outside sources of supplementary funds.

JOB FIVE: Start developing good working relations with other organizations, including Unesco's Secretariat, the French Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Education, French universities, OECD personnel, and other appropriate institutions and individuals.

JOB SIX: Start identifying important research topics and training needs, with the help of experienced educational leaders and broad-gauged social science researchers interested in education and development.

I doubt that it could happen as easily in today's more highly bureaucratized world, but in 1963 many impossible things were still possible. Within three days of my returning to Paris the first three recruits to IIEP's new staff were in harness and rearing to go. Two of them were experienced Unesco staff members with a remarkable grasp of administrative complexities – Madeleine Alpert and Charles Berkowitch.

The third was an all-purpose weapon I had persuaded to join me from Washington, Guy Benveniste. By mid-July when the new IIEP Board arrived for their first meeting we had already made significant dents on most of the 'Six Big Jobs' (though there was still much to be accomplished).

To take but one example, finding an appropriate facility for the Institute turned into a fascinating but time-consuming search. The Ministry of Education had nothing available at the time and so gave us *carte blanche* to search for ourselves. We began with dreams of occupying one of those stunningly beautiful old buildings in 'The Marais', the oldest section of Paris that was undergoing a major face-lift. It was under the direction of Andre Malraux, then the Minister of Culture whose host I had been when he visited Washington a year earlier. So we arranged a visit to Monsieur Malraux. He was cordial and highly sympathetic but unfortunately had nothing available to offer just then.

We next made a date with the Mayor of Paris, who we were told had command over quite a bit of local real estate. He welcomed us cordially but of course did not have the slightest idea of what the 'International Institute for Educational Planning' was.

What I mainly remember about that interview, apart from how sizeable and handsome both the Mayor and his office were, was his startling response after I had just begun to explain who we were and turned to Guy Benveniste to translate.

'Ce n'est pas nécessaire, Monsieur,' the Mayor interrupted, then continuing in French said, 'Obviously you have French ancestors, Mr. Coombs, because I understand your English very well.' Ironically, some years later when I researched my roots I discovered he was quite right. The evidence was clear that the name Coombs (Le Coombe) was imported during the lengthy English occupation of Western France. Much later, in the early 20th century, long after the French had gotten their land back, an ancestor who was an anti-clerical politician named Le Coombe, was elected Prime Minister of France (but apparently did not hold the job long).

A Case of Diplomatic Hookey

These recollections could continue far into the night, but before I run completely out of space I must conclude by explaining how one Ambassador C.E. Beeby got into the IIEP act.

Shortly after reporting for duty in Paris somebody at Unesco introduced me to 'an important international educator named Beeby, who is New Zealand's Ambassador to France'. Remembering my recent experience in the US State Department I thought to myself, 'Why is an outstanding world educator masquerading as an ambassador - or is it vice-versa?'

About three nights later I ran into this fellow again at one of those unavoidable diplomatic receptions filled with hors d'oeuvres, warm champagne, and small talk. The Ambassador and I got beyond mere small talk when he invited me to have lunch the next day in the garden of his embassy. Just then someone I knew drifted by and I hastily said, 'I want to introduce you to my new friend, the Ambassador from Australia'. I realized before I ever finished the sentence what a horrible gaff I had made (perhaps even punishable by life in prison in New Zealand). But this obvious gentleman and diplomat simply looked away, smiling, and reached for a glass of champagne.

Years later, in 1991, when my wife and I visited Beeb in Wellington, I reminded him of this gaff and asked his pardon. Still the diplomat, he replied, 'Really! I don't remember that'.

The point of this story is that when I joined the Ambassador for lunch in the garden that day, all he wanted to talk about was ‘the exciting new institute’ and how lucky I was to be running it. Eventually he casually asked if it would be agreeable if he ‘visited the Institute from time to time, just to keep my hand in’. I gladly consented.

It can now be revealed, since he has long since left the diplomatic payroll, that this fellow Beeby spent many happy and productive hours at the young IIEP, playing diplomatic hookey. As a result I shall forever be grateful to the Government of New Zealand for this unwitting but highly productive subsidy to the IIEP.

I mentioned earlier that Beeb became an early ‘hero’ of the IIEP, which is no exaggeration. As one example, he agreed right at the outset, while still living in Paris, to become Editor of the well-known IIEP series on *The Fundamentals of Educational Planning* and he retained that role during his subsequent years at Harvard and at the University of London. The series reached No. 12 before I left Paris and has now passed No. 40. I don’t know just where Beeb left off but it was certainly somewhere near No. 20.⁴

Another of his major contributions was initiated one day when Beeb and I got talking about the excessive emphasis given to *quantitative* dimensions of education by most planners, whereas the most serious problems of educational development had become qualitative (defined to include the *relevance* of education being offered in schools to the rapidly changing learning needs of the learners). After several further such discussions we concluded that the IIEP should organize one of its special intensive three day seminars on this subject, to which a diversified group of outstanding scholars and practitioners would be invited.

That seminar turned out to be, in my judgement, the most lively, penetrating and revealing of all the special IIEP seminars conducted in my period. The resulting book, edited by C.E. Beeby, *Qualitative Aspects of Educational Planning* (Unesco/IIEP, 1969) was one of the first on this important subject, and is still one of the best.

So ends this incomplete story of the creation of the IIEP, an unusual organization still going strong and making important further contributions more than a quarter century since it was created. It is a story that, if well examined, could yield important lessons of value in the future to international institutes addressed to important and lasting worldwide problems. It is to be hoped, therefore, that one or more able international historians will soon tackle this story while important sources of evidence are still available.

⁴ See annex to Jacques Hallak, *Educational Planning Today*, in Fascicle 6.