Unesco report on education: the good and the bad news

More children starting primary school, more girls in school and increased spending on education goes alongside with poor quality teaching, the high cost of schooling and persistent high levels of adult illiteracy.

The number of children enrolled in primary school, the percentage of girls attending classes and the amount of money spent on education has all soared in the past decade, according to a United Nations report released recently. However, adult illiteracy levels remain stubbornly high and the cost of schooling in much of the world continues to limit access for millions of children.

The report by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation monitors the latest progress towards the goal of "education for all", which the world's governments agreed to in 1999 in the Senegalese capital, Dakar, with the aim of achieving the result by 2015.

It shows that between 1999 and 2005, primary school enrolment jumped by 39 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 22 per cent in South and West Asia - the two regions struggling most to achieve education for all.

Nicholas Burnett, Unesco's assistant director-general for education, told reporters at a press conference in New York that at least 11 of the 25 countries posting the most rapid enrolment gains during the period had abolished school fees.

Solid national policies and higher domestic spending were combining to drive primary school enrolment, he said, particularly in Ethiopia, Yemen, Mozambique and Tanzania. Aid from industrialised states to low-income countries also rose from US$1.6 billion to $2.3 billion in six years.

In total, an estimated 72 million children of primary school age - or about 10 per cent of the world's children of that age group - do not attend any school at all, down from 96 million almost a decade ago.

Burnett noted that, since 1999, at least 17 nations had also achieved gender parity in primary school education including Ghana, Senegal, Malawi, Mauritania and Uganda, and 19 at secondary level including Bolivia, Peru and Vietnam.

But he said the goal of education for all remains elusive for many countries, with Unesco's development index on this question indicating that 25 nations are far from achieving it. He said this number was conservative given the index does not include nations, such as those in conflict, that do not have available data.

Adult illiteracy persists, despite increased spending, in part because of the high cost of education in some countries and the poor quality of schooling in much of the world. As many as 774 million adults, or almost one in five of the global population, lack basic literacy skills - and almost three-quarters of this category live in just 15 different nations.

Burnett called on wealthy nations to increase their spending to match earlier commitments, and to target their spending more at the primary school level, rather than post-secondary education.

Poor countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, should upgrade and professionalise their system for
employing and training teachers so that the quality of education is improved and there are enough new teachers to meet the growing demand thanks to the rising enrolment rates.

The full report, summary report and additional information is available on www.efareport.unesco.org.