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World Conference on Higher Education

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action

Paris, 5 – 9 October 1998

SUMMARY

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**of the World Declaration on Higher Education
for the Twenty-first Century**

Preliminary Version

S U M M A R Y

1. Access to higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit, in keeping with Article 26.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This principle should be the basis for policies in higher education and measures must be taken, whenever necessary, to increase the participation of women (in particular at the decision-making level and in all disciplines), of minorities and of disadvantaged groups in higher education. The principle of merit has implications for the financing of higher education - nobody can be discriminated against because they lack of financial resources. The interface between higher education and secondary education must be reinforced. Secondary education should be reoriented and not limit itself to access to higher education; emphasis must also be placed on its function to prepare students for active life.
2. The traditional missions of higher education institutions (to educate, to undertake research and to provide services to the community) are still valid, but we affirm that its main mission nowadays is to educate citizens, providing a permanent space for higher learning. Moreover, higher education has acquired an unprecedented role in present-day society, as a vital component of cultural, social, economic and political development, and as a pillar of endogenous capacity-building, democracy and peace.
3. Higher education institutions must develop their critical function, through the pursuit of truth and justice, and by exercising ethical and scientific rigour in all activities. They should also enhance their prospective function, through the ongoing analysis of emergent social, economic, cultural and political trends, acting as a watchtower, able to foresee, anticipate and provide early warning, thereby playing a preventative role. For this, they should enjoy full academic freedom

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and preserve their autonomy, while being fully responsible and accountable towards society.

4. Quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept which should embrace all its functions and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, infrastructure and the academic environment. Particular attention should be paid to research, which advances knowledge and attests to intellectual excellence. Innovation, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity should be promoted and reinforced in programmes with a direct bearing on sustainable human development. Higher education institutions in all regions should be committed to internal and external evaluation. However, this must be context-specific to ensure the most appropriate methodology.

5. National and institutional decision-makers should place students and their needs at the centre of their concerns. Higher education institutions should further develop counselling and guidance and should consider students as major partners and responsible stakeholders in the renewal of higher education.

6. Diversifying systems, institutions and programmes of study is essential both to meet demand and to give students the rigorous background and training required by the twenty-first century. Learners must have an optimal range of choice and the acquisition of knowledge and know-how should be viewed in a lifelong perspective, based on flexible entry and exit points within the system. Curricula need to be recast so as to go beyond simple cognitive mastery of disciplines and include the acquisition of skills, competencies and abilities for creative and critical analysis and independent thinking.

7. A vigorous policy of staff development is an essential element for higher education institutions and clear policies should be established concerning higher education teachers, so as to update and improve their skills, with stimulus for constant innovation in the curriculum, in teaching and in learning methods, and with an appropriate professional and financial status, in keeping with the provisions of the Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel approved by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1997.

8. The potential of new information technologies for the renewal of higher education by extending and diversifying delivery, and by making knowledge and information available to a wider public should be fully utilized. Equitable access to these should be assured through international co-operation and support to countries that lack capacities to acquire such tools.

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9. Relevance in higher education should be assessed in terms of the fit between what the institutions do and what society expects of them. This requires political impartiality and, at the same time, a better harmonization with the world of work, basing their long-term orientations on social aims and needs, on reinforcement of the community service functions, including its contribution to peace, sustainable development, environment, and on development of the whole education system.

10. Higher education should be considered as a public good. While diversified sources of funding are necessary, public support for higher education and research remains essential. Management and financing in higher education should be instruments to improve quality and relevance. They require the development of appropriate planning and policy analysis capacities and strategies, based on co-operation and co-ordination between higher education institutions and responsible state authorities.

11. The international dimension of higher education is an inherent part of its quality. Networking, which has emerged as a major means of action, should be based on sharing, solidarity and equality among partners. Particular efforts should be made to set up programmes in the home country so as to reduce the brain drain or the departure of skilled human capital. In this manner, higher education can make an essential contribution to bridging the gap separating rich and poor countries, one of the major issues of our times.

12. Close partnership amongst all stakeholders - national and institutional policy-makers, governments and parliaments, the media, teaching staff, researchers, students and their families, the world of work, community groups - is required in order to set in train a movement for the in-depth reform and renewal of higher education.

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