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Item 4.7 of the provisional agenda

**WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION  
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: VISION AND ACTION**

**OUTLINE**

**Source:** Item proposed by the Director-General.

**Background:** In pursuance of resolution 1, paragraph 2.B(k), adopted by the General Conference at its 29th session, UNESCO organized the World Conference on Higher Education which took place in Paris from 5 to 9 October 1998, attended by some 4,200 participants, including 130 ministers responsible for higher education, with a view to adopting a Global Action Plan for the in-depth reform of higher education systems.

**Purpose:** This document presents an overview of the preparatory phase and of the proceedings of the Conference. It contains a summary of the World Declaration on Higher Education and describes the follow-up measures currently in hand, the main aim of which is to promote the lines of emphasis adopted by the Conference.

**Decisions required:** paragraph 30.

## **Background and *raison d'être* of the World Conference on Higher Education**

1. As we approach the end of the twentieth century, we observe an unprecedented expansion of higher education and a growing awareness of its importance for economic and social development. Nevertheless, in every region of the world, higher education is in a state of crisis. Student enrolments are not in harmony with the financing capacity of States. The latter is tending to level off or even decline. Moreover, the integration into the world of work of young people graduating from higher education is becoming an increasingly complex matter.

2. These present-day trends in higher education and the new challenges which it is called upon to meet, in particular those resulting from the development of new information and communication technologies (NICT), make it essential to rethink its role and its mission and to refocus its development so as to match new approaches and new priorities. It was this line of emphasis that guided UNESCO action throughout its Third Medium-Term Plan (1990-1995). It has been pursued during the fourth such period, namely, the Medium-Term Strategy (1996-2001).

3. This was the context in which, in 1995, in pursuance of a resolution adopted by the General Conference at its 27th session, a document entitled "UNESCO Policy Paper for Change and Development in Higher Education" was prepared. It was in order to take UNESCO participation a stage further in this major debate, with a view to securing renewed support on the part of the international community, that it was decided to organize a World Conference on Higher Education focused on the theme: "Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action".

4. This new initiative thus serves to complement the world consultation organized in Jomtien (Thailand) in 1990 on basic education for all, and the 45th session of the International Conference on Education on the theme "Strengthening of the role of teachers in a changing world" (Geneva, 1996). It ties in with other conferences sponsored by UNESCO: the second International Congress on Education and Informatics - Educational Policies and New Technologies (Moscow, 1996); the fifth International Conference on Adult Education (Hamburg, 1997); the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development (Stockholm, 1998). That initiative was pursued through other major conferences held in 1999: the second International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education - Lifelong Learning and Training: A Bridge to the Future (Seoul), and the World Conference on Science for the Twenty-first Century: A New Commitment (Budapest).

5. The purpose of the World Conference on Higher Education was to establish the basic principles for an in-depth reform of higher education systems in the world in order that they should contribute more effectively to ushering in a peace rooted in the development and affirmation of the principles of equality, justice, solidarity and freedom. An analysis of the status of higher education brings to the fore three paramount priorities to which the utmost attention must go: a broadening of access on merit; renewal of higher education systems and institutions; and stronger links with society, in particular with the world of work.

This determination to renew higher education is geared to four key requirements: relevance, quality, management and financing, and international cooperation. It is predicated on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and on the Convention against Discrimination in Education, adopted in 1960. Without imposing models or laying down rigid directives, it aims to define basic intellectual guiding principles that can assist Member States in formulating their own policies, suited to their specific circumstances.

## **Preparations for the World Conference**

6. The Conference was designed and conducted in synergy with the world higher education community.

7. **An Advisory Group**, under the chairmanship of Professor Georges Haddad, Honorary President, University of Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, comprising eminent figures from all regions of the world, was set up to assist the Division of Higher Education during the design stage. This Advisory Group appointed a **nine-member Steering Committee** to be responsible for follow-up during the different stages of preparation of the Conference.

## **Regional conferences**

8. The process of reflection began within the principal regions through the organization of regional gatherings, which provided an opportunity for wide-scale mobilization.

**Latin America and the Caribbean:** Regional Conference held in Havana, Cuba, from 18 to 22 November 1996 on “Policies and strategies for the transformation of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean”. Meeting organized by CRESALC (UNESCO Caracas Office).

**Africa:** Regional Conference held in Dakar, Senegal, from 31 March to 4 April 1997 on “Higher Education in Africa for the Twenty-first Century”. Meeting organized by BREDA (UNESCO Dakar Office).

**Asia and the Pacific:** Regional Conference held in Tokyo, Japan, from 8 to 10 July 1997 on “Higher Education National Strategies and Regional Cooperation for the Twenty-first Century”. Meeting organized by PROAP (UNESCO Bangkok Office).

**Europe:** Regional Conference held in Palermo, Italy, from 25 to 27 September 1997 on “A European Agenda for Change for Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century”. Meeting organized by CEPES (UNESCO Bucharest Office) and the Association of European Universities (CRE).

**Arab States:** Regional Conference held in Beirut, Lebanon, from 2 to 6 March 1998 on “Regional Challenges for Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century”. Meeting organized by UNEDBAS (UNESCO Beirut Office).

At the close of each regional conference, a Declaration and a Plan of Action were adopted. These documents outline the main priorities for the development of higher education in the region, and propose strategies to be applied. The regional Declarations were taken into account at the time of formulating the draft World Declaration and the draft Framework for Priority Action at world level.

## **Mobilization through other conferences**

9. Over 130 meetings relating to the theme of the Conference were organized by various UNESCO partners in the different regions. Noteworthy among these are two special meetings: in Toronto (Canada) to discuss priorities for the North America region, and in Strasbourg (France) to continue the debate on Europe.

### **Preparation of the work in commission**

10. The working documents of the four commissions of the World Conference were prepared in collaboration with specialists from the different regions: **Commission I** - Relevance - Ms H. Vessuri (Argentina); **Commission II** - Quality - Mr D. Ekong (Nigeria); **Commission III** - Management and financing - Mr M. Skilbeck (Australia); **Commission IV** - International cooperation - Mr D. Chitoran (Romania).

These documents were taken into account in the main working documents: “Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action”, and “Towards an *Agenda 21* for Higher Education”.

### **Preparation of the thematic debates**

11. The 12 thematic debates organized on the priority topics for the development of higher education worldwide were prepared on the basis of contributions by leading representatives of NGOs and IGOs specializing in this field, and in collaboration with participants in the Collective Consultation of NGOs, and with recognized experts in the field of higher education. All in all, some 50 partners were thus associated with the UNESCO Secretariat in the preparatory work.

The thematic debates focused on the following issues: *The requirements of the world of work; Higher education and sustainable human development; Contributing to national and regional development; Higher education staff development: a continuing mission; Higher education for a new society: a student vision; From traditional to virtual: the new information technologies; Higher education and research: challenges and opportunities; The contribution of higher education to the education system as a whole; Women and higher education: issues and perspectives; Promoting a culture of peace; Mobilizing the power of culture; Autonomy, social responsibility and academic freedom.*

### **Organization of the World Conference**

12. **Election of the Bureau of the Conference** - The proceedings were conducted under the presidency of Mr André Sonko, Minister of Education of the Republic of Senegal, assisted by a Bureau consisting of representatives of Romania, Cuba, the People’s Republic of China and Saudi Arabia.

13. **Drafting Group** - Ms S. Halimi (France) chaired, in her capacity as Rapporteur-General, the Drafting Group composed of representatives of the following Member States and organizations: Algeria, Australia, Belarus, Chile, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Germany, Italy, Japan, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, Syrian Arab Republic, Education International and the International Association of Universities.

14. **Participation** - Nearly 4,200 delegates representing the main categories of partners took part in the Conference: national policy-makers, heads of establishments, professors, researchers, students, representatives of economic and professional communities, representatives of civil society, parliamentarians, NGOs representing associations and conferences of rectors, those in charge of UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN networks, teachers’ unions. One hundred and eighty-two Member States sent representatives, of whom 130 of ministerial rank (ministers or deputy ministers). In addition, nearly 800 observers attended various meetings of the Conference.

The United Nations University made a major contribution to preparing the Conference, and to organizing one of the thematic debates and transmitting the proceedings of the World Conference directly via the Internet. Three sister agencies of the United Nations system - ILO, UNDP and UNIDO - sent representatives, as did the World Bank and several regional banks.

15. **Conduct of the proceedings** - The alternate organization of the main activities (plenary meetings with heads of delegation, special gatherings, discussions in commission, thematic debates) worked satisfactorily, as did the forums bringing together regional development banks and economic sector entrepreneurs.

16. The **plenary meetings** provided an opportunity for heads of delegation to supply precise information on national higher education systems and to present relevant initiatives currently under way in the different countries or being launched by partner organizations.

Two hundred and four heads of delegation (Member States, United Nations agencies, IGOs, NGOs) took part in the plenary debate. Their contributions can be accessed on the UNESCO Archives site (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ulis/ged.html>).

**The work in commission** brought to a conclusion the debates that had begun at regional conference level on the main topics identified: relevance of higher education; quality of higher education; management and financing of higher education; international cooperation.

The main working documents can be accessed on the Internet (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ulis/ged.html>), and are in course of publication.

The 12 thematic debates and the forums provided settings ideally suited to broadening and pursuing in greater depth the initial process of reflection conducted in plenary and during the commission discussions. The working documents and contributions of the panelists taking part in the thematic debates can be accessed on the Archives site (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ulis/ged.html>) and are in course of publication.

17. All these contributions provided input for the drafting of the World Declaration on Higher Education and the Framework for Priority Action, which were both adopted by consensus. These documents are available on the website of the World Conference: <http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog.html>.

18. A summary of the World Declaration is presented below:

### **Summary of the World Declaration on Higher Education**

- 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. As a consequence, no discrimination can be accepted in granting access to higher education on grounds of race, gender, language, religion or economic, cultural or social distinctions, or physical disabilities.
- The core missions of higher education systems (to educate, to train, to undertake research and, in particular, to contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of society as a whole) should be preserved, reinforced and further expanded, namely **to educate highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens** and to provide opportunities (*espaces ouvertes*) **for higher learning and for learning throughout life**. 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, the consolidation of human rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace, in a context of justice. It is the duty of higher education to ensure that the values and ideals of a culture of peace prevail.

- Higher education institutions and their personnel and students should preserve and develop their crucial functions, through the exercise of ethics and scientific and intellectual rigour in their various activities. They should also enhance their **critical and forward-looking** function, through the ongoing analysis of emerging social, economic, cultural and political trends, providing a focus for forecasting, warning and prevention. For this, they should enjoy full **academic autonomy and freedom**, while being fully responsible and **accountable** to society.
- **Relevance in higher education should be assessed in terms of the fit between what society expects of institutions and what they do.** For this, institutions and systems, in particular in their reinforced relations with the world of work, should **base their long-term orientations on societal aims and needs, including the respect of cultures and environment protection.** Developing entrepreneurial skills and initiatives should become major concerns of higher education. Special attention should be paid to higher education's role of service to society, especially activities aimed at eliminating poverty, intolerance, violence, illiteracy, hunger, environmental degradation and disease, and to activities aiming at the development of peace, through an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach.
- Higher education is part of a seamless system, starting with early childhood and primary education and continuing through life. The contribution of higher education to the development of the whole education system and the reordering of **its links with all levels of education, in particular with secondary education, should be a priority.** Secondary education should both prepare for and facilitate access to higher education as well as offer broad training and prepare students for active life.
- **Diversifying** higher education models and recruitment methods and criteria 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.
- **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 **the advancement of knowledge through research.** Higher education institutions in all regions should be committed to **transparent internal and external evaluation**, conducted openly by independent specialists. However, due attention should be paid to specific institutional, national and regional contexts in order to take into account diversity and **to avoid uniformity.** There is a perceived need for a new vision and paradigm of higher education, which should be student-oriented. To achieve this goal, curricula need to be recast so as to go beyond simple cognitive mastery of disciplines and include the acquisition of skills, competences and abilities for communication, creative and critical analysis, independent thinking and team work in multicultural contexts.

- A vigorous policy of **staff development** is an essential element for higher education institutions. Clear policies should be established concerning **higher education teachers**, so as to update and improve their skills, with stimulus for constant innovation in curriculum, teaching and learning methods, and with an appropriate professional and financial status, and **for excellence in research and teaching**, reflecting the corresponding provisions of the Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel approved by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1997.
- National and institutional decision-makers should place **students** and their needs at the centre of their concerns and should consider them as major partners and responsible stakeholders in the renewal of higher education. Guidance and counselling services should be developed, in cooperation with student organizations, to take account of the needs of ever more diversified categories of learners. Students who do drop out should have suitable opportunities to return to higher education if and when appropriate. Institutions should educate students to become well-informed and deeply motivated citizens, who can think critically, analyse problems of society, look for solutions to the problems of society, apply them and accept social responsibilities.
- Measures must be taken or reinforced **to ensure the participation of women in higher education**, in particular at the decision-making level and in all disciplines in which they are under-represented. Further efforts are required to eliminate all gender stereotyping in higher education. To overcome obstacles and to enhance the access of women to higher education remains an urgent priority in the renewal process of systems and institutions.
- The potential of **new information and communication 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 cooperation and support to countries that lack capacities to acquire such tools. Adapting these technologies to national, regional and local needs and securing technical, educational, management and institutional systems to sustain them should be a priority.
- Higher education should be considered as a **public service**. While diversified sources of funding, private and public, are necessary, **public support for higher education and research remains essential** to ensure a balanced achievement of its educational and social missions. Management and financing in higher education should be instruments to improve quality and relevance. This requires the development of appropriate planning and policy-analysis capacities and strategies, based on **partnerships** between higher education institutions and responsible State authorities. Autonomy to manage internal affairs is necessary, but with clear and transparent accountability to society.
- 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. The “brain drain” has yet to be stemmed, since it continues to deprive the developing countries and those in transition, of the high-level expertise necessary to accelerate their socio-economic progress. Priority should be given to training programmes in the developing

countries, in centres of excellence forming regional and international networks, with short periods of specialized and intensive study abroad.

- Regional and international normative instruments for the recognition of studies and diplomas should be ratified and implemented, including certification of skills, competences and abilities of graduates, making it easier for students to change courses, in order to facilitate mobility within and between national systems.
- Close **partnership** amongst all stakeholders - national and institutional policy-makers, governments and parliaments, the media, teaching and related 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.

### **Follow-up to the World Conference on Higher Education**

19. Follow-up measures are currently being devised whose main purpose it is to foster reflection of the main lines of emphasis adopted by the World Conference, through the World Declaration and the Framework for Priority Action, in actual national policies and budgets.

20. Working groups are being set up in **Member States and in partner NGOs and IGOs** to pursue the process of reflection and launch optimally relevant schemes that make allowance for national realities.

21. **Focal points** have been instituted both by Member States and by partner IGOs and NGOs. They will maintain contact with the Division of Higher Education in order to keep it abreast of the most innovatory initiatives being taken in individual countries or by the various partners.

22. **Regional committees** are being set up for follow-up purposes. They will be composed of members of boards responsible for providing administrative support to UNESCO Regional Offices, broadened in scope to include leading figures and NGO representatives who took a significant part in preparing and organizing the World Conference.

23. The **regional committees** will have the task of maintaining contact with national focal points operating within their region's sphere of competence, and will be responsible for framing regional action plans that take account of the World Declaration and of the declarations adopted by the regional conferences.

24. In addition, an **international follow-up committee** is at present being appointed by the Director-General. Composed of leading figures put forward by Member States and by UNESCO's chief partners in higher education, it will give its views on regional plans of action and advise the Director-General on follow-up measures. The international follow-up committee will be chaired by Mr André Sonko, President of the World Conference, and will include, in addition to the specialists proposed by Member States, Ms S. Halimi, Rapporteur-General of the World Conference, and the Rector of the United Nations University.

25. The Secretariat's **Intersectoral Committee on Higher Education** will be given a greater role. It will facilitate information exchanges between sectors within the Organization for the sake of closer harmonization of activities relating to training, research and reflection on higher education issues worldwide.

26. This Committee, placed under the authority of the Deputy Director-General for Education and whose secretariat will be provided by the Division of Higher Education, will enable periodical stock to be taken of cooperative schemes launched under the UTWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme with a view to improving their synergy.

27. Initiatives are currently being taken to develop Chairs and regional networks on higher education that will gradually build up, in partnership with the United Nations University, a world network of Chairs and networks on higher education.

28. **Restructuring of the Division of Higher Education** - As the linchpin of the Secretariat's action in matters of follow-up, the Division of Higher Education henceforth comprises three sections:

Section for Higher Education Policy and Reform;

Section for Inter-university Cooperation;

Section for Teacher Education.

### **Relationship with the Draft Programme and Budget for 2000-2001 (30 C/5)**

29. UNESCO action in the field of higher education for the 2000-2001 biennium will draw its inspiration from the World Declaration and the Framework for Priority Action adopted by the World Conference on Higher Education.

Inter-university cooperation and mobility will be therein strengthened, in particular through the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme.

All efforts will be focused on developing genuine solidarity on behalf of developing countries and those in transition.

30. In the light of the information contained in this document, the General Conference may wish to adopt the following resolution:

The General Conference,

Having considered document 30 C/16,

Endorsing the World Declaration on Higher Education and the Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development in Higher Education,

Approves the main lines of emphasis adopted by the World Conference on Higher Education;

Reconfirms the priority to be assigned to follow-up and the need to provide for the requisite human, financial and logistical resources when adopting the Programme and Budget for 2000-2001 (30 C/5).