

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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Note1: To meet UNESCO publishing standards, some editing of papers has been required.

Note2: Authors are responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in signed articles and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

**Speech of Mrs Lalla Ben Barka
Deputy Executive Secretary, UNECA**

Honourable Chairman of the Conference,
Honourable Director-General of UNESCO,
Honourable Ministers for Higher Education,
Experts and Representatives of Higher Education Institutions,
Representatives of Governments and Non-Governmental Organizations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and privilege for me to address this conference on behalf of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. May I first express my deep appreciation to our hosts, the Government and people of France and to our sister organization, UNESCO, as well as to all organizations and member countries, who have contributed in organizing this Conference. Charting a better future for higher education in the twenty-first century is a major challenge worldwide, but one which is urgently needed in Africa.

The experiences from the various African countries show that as we approach the end of the millenium, higher education everywhere finds itself in a contradictory situation. On the one hand, most institutions of higher education in the 1990's, have been under constant pressure to increase their student enrolment. UNESCO tells us that the average annual increase in higher education enrolment for sub-Saharan Africa in 1996 was 7.5 percent, the highest increase of any region in the world. The corresponding value for Asia was 5.6 percent, Latin America and the Caribbean 4.4 percent, Europe 2.2 percent and Northern America 1.6 percent. And yet, tertiary enrolment ratios for the population 20 to 24 years of age in Africa remain the lowest in the world.

On the other hand, crisis management of our universities has been a major issue for over a decade now. The infrastructure of most campuses is in a decrepit state, basic teaching and research tools are not available, lecture rooms cannot accommodate the very large number of students. For these reasons, institutions of higher learning will need to maintain the attention and support of all policy-makers and stakeholders. In this statement, I would like to dwell on two issues: the challenges of higher education in Africa; and what the Economic Commission for Africa is doing to support human resources development in the continent.

The Challenges of Higher Education

While higher education is of crucial importance to Africa in meeting the development challenges of the twenty-first century, there is evidence that the socio-economic and political crises facing the continent threaten the ability of most institutions of higher education to play an effective role in the region's development. And we all know that the worldwide liberalization of trade and finance, its impetus to globalization of production and markets, are opening up opportunities for African countries to expand trade outside the continent. African institutions of higher education will be needed to guide the strategic responses to the effects of globalization.

With regards to research and development activities (R&D) - the highest form of higher education it becomes urgent to reverse the present situation - where we have a weak link between research from our institutions of higher learning and their application in society, especially in industry, commerce and agriculture.

I believe and I am sure you will agree with me that the engine of sustained growth, structural transformation and development rest with, to a large extent, on the availability of a pool of medium- to high-level skilled manpower in science, technology, management, agriculture, and so on. Therefore, while expanding basic education is a noble goal, it is also important to build a solid skilled human resource-base by expanding and strengthening secondary and higher education.

In connection with Africa's research efforts, especially from the universities, the little research that has been produced hardly benefits the public at large. After several years of frustration, many well-trained African science and technology experts are finding better opportunities elsewhere, the efficiency of research is weakened, and top-level science and technology education programmes have fallen into disrepair.

Today, there are more than a million skilled expatriates from Africa settled in Western Europe, the USA, and Canada. These migrant professionals contribute in no small way to increasing the disparities between the world's rich and poor nations. But it is Africa that needs them the most. What can we do? What must we do to change this phenomenon of Brain Drain into Brain Gain?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am happy to report that there has been some progress towards overcoming some of the difficulties and meeting the challenges facing Africa's higher education. The need to harmonize the functions and role of higher education to be in line with the continent's development requirements has been articulated in various meetings with African Ministers of Education, University Vice Chancellors and Rectors, the Association of African Universities, and the ECA-OAU-ADB Joint Secretariat. Let me give some examples.

ECA is developing specialized capacity to help African states with science and technology policy, including experience in several national policy dialogues and has called on appropriate experts through the African Regional Conference on Science and Technology, and its own Conference of Ministers.

The United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa (SIA), launched in March 1996, singled out Africa's key development challenges and in the field of information technology for instance Africa needs a mammoth jump. In this regard, an action framework to build information and communication infrastructure in Africa, called the African Information Society Initiative, was approved by the 1996 session of the ECA Conference of Ministers. Key activities mounted since mid-1996 have included a policy awareness campaign on the initiative, organization of policy workshops on connectivity and on the overall use of information and communication technologies for development, organization of Internet training workshops, advisory services on the elaboration of national information and communication plans, and projects on telecentres.

Partnership with other organizations has been central to providing the necessary coordination, synergy and resources to undertake the wide scope of activities outlined in the Initiative. Partners include UNESCO, ITU, UNDP, UNIDO, the World Bank and the International Development Research Centre (IRDC) of Canada.

ECA also developed in 1996 a Framework Agenda for building and utilizing critical capacity in Africa and was endorsed by the twenty-second meeting of African Ministers responsible for Planning and Development. The Framework Agenda is distinguished by its comprehensiveness. Its scope spans all the major priority areas and addresses the human resources, institutional and infrastructural requirements for making sustained progress in the priority areas in the coming two to three decades. In collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Association of African Universities (AAU), the ECA is currently preparing a conference on brain drain and capacity building in Africa. It is against the backdrop of the recently observed continuing trends in human capital flight and the implication of this for development capacity that the question of brain drain and capacity building will be approached in this conference.

Distinguished delegates,

These are some of the Economic Commission for Africa's programmes on higher education. For our part, we pledge our efforts to help the continent develop its human resources as an integral part of sustainable development.

I thank you for your attention.