

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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

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The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

**Speech of Mr Sheldon Shaeffer
Representative of UNICEF**

On behalf of UNICEF, I welcome this opportunity to address this plenary session of the World Conference on Higher Education.

If the nature of this plenary session were a bit more pedagogically friendly, I would ask for a show of hands on questions close to the heart of UNICEF. The questions are: are the principles and articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child ever discussed in the courses and debates of your institutions and systems of higher education? Is the institution with which you now work operating differently in any way because of your country's ratification of this Convention? Is your institution attempting in any way to respond to the increasing violence, abuse, and violations of the rights wrought against children -- on the streets, in armed conflict, in hazardous labour, even within families and schools?

These questions are important to UNICEF because it is not only the specialized agency of the United Nations focused on the rights and well-being of women and children -- it is also the one agency specifically charged with helping governments to implement the Convention, the most universally-ratified international agreement in history (by all countries except Somalia and the United States). As such, UNICEF is concerned about children's **survival and growth**, including their health and nutritional status; their **education and development**; their **protection**; and their **participation** in activities and decisions affecting their own lives.

At first glance, one might ask why UNICEF is at this conference at all. The gap between the concerns of UNICEF focusing on children 0-18 years old and those of this Conference focusing on university-age students and their institutions appears wide -- sometimes even with competition for facilities, resources, and government and donor funds. But I am here for a very simple reason: to encourage closer ties and more comprehensive linkages between the concerns of UNICEF and those of higher education systems -- between the well-being of infants, young children, and their families on the one side and the education of university students on the other.

Why are closer ties so important? UNICEF feels that it is essential to have higher education systems and institutions of good quality which do three things: first, assess and analyze more clearly the status and trends concerning children; second, train talented and creative cadres for the future -- teachers and administrators, politicians and legislators, social workers and doctors, lawyer and judges, even engineers and business people who will some day be responsible for guaranteeing the rights and well-being of children; and third, influence generations of university-educated parents to better care for their own children. I expect that you, from the area of higher education, feel it essential that the youth who enter your institutions are sufficiently educated to become the cadres of university students and eventually the lecturers and administrators you need for the new century.

Thus, the two areas of education -- basic education and higher education -- should be seen as part of a unified system of education, each with a similar concern for the well-being and rights of children. Children of «good quality» turn into university students and staff of «good quality», and good higher education produces the policy-makers and practitioners able to design and implement policies and programmes favourable to the young child.

How might closer linkages be put in place?

The first way is in **the content of higher education** -- what it teaches about -- the knowledge and skills, attitudes and values about children which it transmits to its students. To what extent, in other words, are the activities and messages of the various faculties of higher education institutions explicitly directed towards the rights and well-being of children and the development of more child-friendly institutions in the society at large? So that, for example:

- faculties of law focus more on child rights, juvenile justice, and the harmonization of the national legal system with the Convention;

- faculties of administration and public policy focus more on the development of child-friendly government policies and programmes;
- faculties of psychology focus more on early childhood development, child learning and behaviour change processes, and the reintegration of children in difficult circumstances;
- faculties of social work focus more on the special needs of families and children at risk -- in conflict, with disabilities, and in need of special protection;
- faculties of medicine and agriculture focus more on the health and nutrition problems facing young children and their mothers; and
- faculties of education and institutes of teacher training focus more on the production of teachers, trainers, managers, and curriculum writers specialized in the broad range of needs of young children. To what extent -- and how -- can we ensure that these faculties and institutes are aware of new science concerning young child development, clearly understand the nature and quality of teaching and learning in their own schools, have internalized the Convention in regard to rights-based school environments and teaching-learning processes, and pay special attention to the training of teachers especially qualified for teaching the young child?

Ultimately, in terms of the content of higher education, the question is how the principles of the Convention can enter into the discourse of universities -- so that all faculties teach about, and reflect in their operating styles and organization, a concern for child rights -- not only what they are but also how people and institutions must act differently because the Convention on the Rights of the Child exists.

The second area for stronger linkages concerns **the role of higher education in society**. To what extent and how can higher education institutions work differently to advance the rights and well-being of children:

- through both basic and action research, to become better collectors and analysts of information on the condition and status of children, better able to monitor trends and challenges in child survival, development, protection, and even participation; for example, through the establishment of inter-faculty institutes of family and child development;
- to pay more attention to building the capacity of staff and students, as well as practicing professionals returning to universities for further training, to promote child-friendly policies and develop child-friendly schools, hospitals, health centres, and justice systems;
- to be more willing to engage in dialogue with politicians and legislators on behalf of the well-being and rights of children;
- to show greater responsiveness and outreach to the community -- especially to its children -- through university-based organizations such as youth development corps and study service programmes; and
- to take part in alliances with non-government organizations, civil society, and the private sector on behalf of children.

A third area for closer linkages is in **the nature of higher education itself**. To what extent can institutions of higher education, building on actions of primary and secondary education, promote the rights of all people -- not only children -- by:

- ensuring greater equality of access to the higher education system for men and for women, especially in those countries where girls systematically lag behind boys in educational achievement -- and for youth disadvantaged because of language, ethnicity, race, or religion; and
- ensuring academic freedom within the university so that it can speak more loudly for human rights and against the abuses of these rights and be able to develop, unfettered, more creative solutions to the problems of the 21st century.

In conclusion, UNICEF wishes the World Conference on Higher Education great success in its debates and decisions -- and looks forward to even closer ties in the future between the world of higher education and the world of the young child.