

**WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century**

**Vision and Action**

UNESCO, Paris, 5 – 9 October 1998

**VOLUME V – PLENARY**

**Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States**

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 Dr Ali M. Al-Towagry,  
Director-General  
Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS)**

Mr Chairman  
Distinguished Delegates  
Director-General  
Excellencies, Colleagues  
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted and honoured to have been invited to address you in this historic moment and to present you with the compliments of the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS) and its higher authorities; the General Conference and the Executive Council. We would like to thank you for inviting us to this conference in accordance with the agreement of co-operation and mutual representation between the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS).

As we meet today, on the eve of the Third Millennium, to discuss the major issues relating to "Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century", we hope that higher education institutions will partake effectively and appropriately in the process of sustained human development.

However, as we look forward to the next century, with hope and anticipation, we should remember the priceless heritage and great achievements of ancient civilizations. Today's rapid breakthroughs in science and technology should be a reminder of the past endeavour and struggle for knowledge because today we reap the harvest of yesterday.

Since higher education, its issues and concerns, represent part of the broad cultural and educational scope of the duties and concerns of the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS), the Bureau has devoted its utmost attention to Education, in general, and Higher Education in particular.

Ever since its inception, the Bureau has regarded higher education and its major concerns as a high priority. Issues such as: scientific, research policies, university personnel, educational input and output, promotion of academic research, the enhancement of capacities of research, linking universities to the world of work and activating their participation in development projects such as previewing the future of Education in the Arab Gulf states, have always been placed high on the agenda of the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS).

Our participation in this conference, with such outstanding group of prominent intellectuals and experts, adds to our educational achievements in the Arab region and enhances our sense of responsibility. We consider the recommendations, discussions and policy orientation of this conference as points of reference that will inspire our visions and actions in planning and undertaking our leading educational work and initiatives in the six member states.

On the eve of the Third Millennium, higher education meets unprecedented challenges. We have to exert our utmost efforts in order to make sure that higher education institutions have the necessary resources and capacity to address such challenges. Among the most urgent challenges facing higher education institutions today is the current waves of changes in all aspects of human life: social, cultural, economic, technical and even ethical. The scope and space of such changes make it almost impossible for some societies to adapt. As a matter of fact, education systems, in general, are too rigid and slow to cope with societal change and address the increasingly diversified and growing needs of society.

If creating, preserving and promoting cultural integrity is among the major traditional goals of higher education, how can it attain this goal when it is confronted with such unprecedented upheaval of change in the way knowledge is developed, acquired and delivered? On the other hand, how can a modern intellectual reach a much needed balance between the required commitment to serve his native

culture and, meanwhile, his intellectual aspiration to cope with the requirements of an increasingly interdependent universal culture, moving ahead towards globalization?

Moreover, the rapid breakthroughs in science and technology and continuous diversification of knowledge make it extremely necessary for us to develop our pedagogical methods, educational systems and curricula.

Higher education should also ensure a balanced achievement of its educational mission; academic excellence and high quality educational input and output, and social demand; open access conditioned only by the merit and capacity of potential candidates. How can we attain this balanced achievement when we are confronted with rapidly increasing difficulties in the contents and methods of higher education, not to mention, the ever increasing costs of such education? This might explain why so many countries, are unable to cope with the pressing social demand on this kind of education.

How could it be possible for higher education institutions to enjoy academic freedom and preserve their autonomy while being fully responsible and accountable towards society? Meanwhile, we should take into account that they, like all other institutions, should achieve social goals and meet their society's expectations.

On the eve of the twenty-first century, we are faced with a lot of serious challenges. Therefore, we have to adopt all the necessary measures, no matter what they take, in order to reach the balanced achievements we have just pointed out.

I have no doubt that you are capable of providing us with seminal ideas and inspirational visions that will lead us to undertake that will lead us to undertake the necessary actions to meet these challenges and forge a better future for next generations.

Thank you.