

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

UNESCO, Paris, 5 – 9 October 1998

VOLUME V – PLENARY

Commonwealth Secretariat

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 Professor Stephen A. Matlin
Director,
Human Resource Development Division
Commonwealth Secretariat**

I am delighted to have been invited to address the Conference on behalf of the Commonwealth Secretariat, an inter-governmental organization which serves the 54 member countries of the Commonwealth and which accords very high priority to the field of Education.

The importance of higher education

The Commonwealth Secretariat has always upheld the importance of higher education in its education work. This commitment was sustained after the Jomtien Conference, and we have continued to work actively in both higher and basic education, including recent work on the contributions which higher education can make in the support of basic education.

Much of our work over recent years has reflected the themes of this conference, as the Secretariat has traditionally given considerable attention to issues of academic student and staff mobility and the sharing of experience and knowledge between Commonwealth countries. This has been in part through pan-Commonwealth schemes such as the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships Plan, which encourages student flows in all directions - particularly at the postgraduate level, and more recent work has encouraged short-term student mobility, particularly at undergraduate level and in a south-south direction.

On the staff side, a major focus in recent years has been the development of a management training scheme for women in positions of leadership in universities. This was the result of intensive co-operation between women from different parts of the Commonwealth, resulting in a unique perspective on the issues in both north and south.

The Secretariat works in response to the needs of our member governments, which are expressed in the mandates given by the triennial Ministers of Education meetings, and many of the themes of the Conference have been reflected in the work of the Education department over recent years.

I'd like now to make specific reference to some of the primary themes of this Conference.

Relevance

The focus on the **relevance** of higher education systems is particularly appropriate, especially at a time when resources are so constrained around the world. This Conference has delivered new and challenging visions of tertiary education systems which are relevant to the societies they serve, and every effort must be focused on achieving this.

We emphasize in particular the need to explore new modes of provision, including especially distance education, in the attempt to ensure that as many people as possible have access to the types of education they will need to fulfil their true potential, both individual and economic.

Access to higher education is a major issue of concern, and this Conference has rightly emphasized that elitist systems of higher education can no longer be considered as an option. The principle of lifelong opportunities for all to achieve some form of tertiary education is one to which we are fully committed. We would like however to stress the importance of considering higher education in all its diversity, as there has been a tendency during the Conference to focus primarily on university-level provision, and it is at the polytechnic or technical level that many of the most valuable contributions to society are made. Every effort must be taken to ensure that such institutions are given the recognition which they deserve.

Quality

The issue of quality has emerged as one of the most important areas for international attention, and it is one which links closely with the priority being given to relevance. If scarce national resources are being invested in education, then institutional effort must be directed at ensuring that it is of the highest possible quality, and that it meets the needs of the population it serves.

Great care must however be taken when international comparisons are made. We hope that an emphasis on quality and academic standards will allow national systems and institutions to focus on what they do best, and what is best for their students, rather than merely attempting to measure themselves against international standards. We see this as very much linked to the need for relevance.

Quality and staff development: Our own most tangible contribution to the Conference has been the opportunity to lead the thematic debate on staff development, the results of which will shortly be published as a joint UNESCO/Commonwealth Secretariat publication. We firmly endorse the debate's recommendation that staff development should be seen as a major element in the development of a professional, flexible and responsive culture that will support the institutions of the twenty-first century.

Finance and Management

Issues of finance and appropriate styles of management have dominated the late-twentieth century, and are certain to remain with us into the twenty-first century. No-one is immune from the sense of financial constraint which is evident in all areas of provision. It is however very encouraging to view the changes which are taking place - more innovative systems of management and planning appear in some cases to give institutions greater freedom to tackle the major issues they face, allowing some hope and dynamism to emerge from situations of great difficulty.

No-one can doubt the seriousness of the financial issues which face higher education institutions in all parts of the world - most particularly in the developing world, where the amount that has been achieved under the most difficult circumstances is quite extraordinary. However the innovativeness of many of the attempts which are being made to diversify sources of financing is very encouraging. We commend the efforts which many countries are making to ensure that equity is given serious consideration when policy decisions are taken over cost-recovery and student fees.

International Co-operation

Co-operation is the guiding ethos of all Commonwealth activities, and it is in international co-operation that the greatest hopes for the future sustainability of higher education systems must lie. It is apparent that international efforts now genuinely strive to achieve a sense of partnership and co-operation, which can only be welcomed. There is a great need to ensure that experience and good practice is shared between countries, and we hope that all modes of international co-operation and development will be explored and expanded.

Within the Commonwealth, we are particularly proud of our record of international co-operation, both with international organizations and with the ministries of education in member states. A large proportion of our member states are classified as 'small states'. Such states are very vulnerable because of their small size, and co-operative initiatives may help to address the issues of specialized human resources and economies of scale. Recent work in tertiary education has included developing a network, in partnership between UNESCO, and ourselves on issues of tertiary education management.

Gender

We are particularly delighted at the attention which has been given to gender issues throughout the Conference, and the emerging consensus on the need to consider gender as an overarching issue, and not one which concerns mainly women. The Commonwealth Secretariat has itself done a considerable amount of work on gender mainstreaming, focusing on the need to take the differing needs of women and men into account, and thus to ensure that gender issues are integrated in all concerns, and not treated separately as solely 'women's issues'.

We see this as a core area of concern: one which offers the possibility of making real change at the deepest possible level, and one which will ensure sustainable change in the future.