

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.

The Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization

**Speech of Dr. Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri
Director General of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO)**

Your Excellency Dr. Federico Mayor, Director General of UNESCO,
Your Excellencies the Ministers,
Your Excellencies the Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am particularly pleased to greet you all on behalf of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), which is privileged to be one of the sponsors of this Conference. I also wish to express my thanks to my friend Dr. Federico Mayor, Director General of UNESCO, for his particular interest in strengthening and expanding the scope of cooperation with the Organization of ISESCO.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The university is the highest educational institution which provides nations with its leaders and elite, promotes intellectual development, gives birth to innovations and discoveries in its laboratories and produces philosophical schools of thought and literary, artistic and social trends, whose professors and scientists put forward theories of good, right and beauty and whose ideas and orientations serve as a reference for policy makers.

In fact, there is a widely held view that the university has three cardinal objectives to achieve. The first objective is to train competent specialists in all walks of life by developing the student's spiritual, social and academic aspects of his personality; by unleashing and nurturing his talents and abilities and by enabling him to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and expertise so that he would actively contribute in the development of his own society. The second objective is to promote scientific research that is grounded on experiment and observation with the aim of reaching the truth. The third objective is to best serve society in all respects.

As we are approaching the 21st Century, we are most urgently required to adequately prepare ourselves to give fresh impetus to the economic take-off by promoting and developing higher education. The Islamic Organization ISESCO is most eager to play a leading part in this respect, something which has prompted it to submit for consideration by Member States the project of a Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World as early as 1987. Ever since, this Federation, of which I am honoured to be the Secretary General, has been striving, through a host of programmes and activities, to promote and develop higher education in Islamic countries through an exchange of experience, education programmes and professors between Member States; the promotion of the university's opening onto its environment, as well as through fostering and developing scientific research in order to make it more instrumental in effecting comprehensive development while safeguarding the cultural identity of those countries.

At present, the Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World boasts as many as a hundred and forty member universities from around the globe.

In addition to the actions undertaken by the Federation, the Islamic Organization has, since it was established in 1982, implemented a large number of important activities related to higher education. In this respect, we may mention, for instance, the adoption of a convention on the equivalence of diplomas and degrees awarded by Islamic countries' schools, universities and institutes, granting scholarships to students in various branches of knowledge, holding symposia and conferences on higher education, appointing permanent and/or visiting university professors in various countries, extending material and moral support to universities, publication of research papers and their translation into ISESCO's working languages as well as assisting university research workers in participating in international university meetings and encounters.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The role of higher education is gaining momentum in the countries of the Muslim World which are striving to effect comprehensive development in an era characterized by computer revolution and Internet. As we

are all aware, if comprehensive development requires in today's world the existence of natural and financial resources, these factors are not sufficient to attain development in a society of services and informatics where there is a dire need for a highly-trained manpower. It is worthwhile noting that the current world economic crisis and the structural adjustment policies pursued by some countries of the Muslim World have compelled the latter to reconsider their own development policies including their higher education policies.

In spite of that financial crisis, the Muslim World still manages to gear 20% of its overall expenditure on education to higher education. We shall also add to this the expenditure incurred by the parents and the students themselves. Nevertheless, the educational system of a large number of Islamic countries remains vulnerable to criticism and reproach. Among the points of criticism commonly raised, one could mention the deliberate concentration on inculcation to the detriment of the promotion of academic research and interaction with the surrounding social and economic institutions, in addition to the low rate of expenditure on scientific research which is as little as 0,4% of the gross national product (GNP), while the same rate reaches 3% in developed countries. The minimum rate of expenditure on scientific research, as proposed by experts, is 1% of the gross national product.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The world today is marked with globalization and proliferation of major economic blocs. The Islamic countries are, therefore, duty-bound to develop clear-cut policies to consolidate their negotiating abilities, to induce the setting up of joint ventures and to facilitate integration into the world economy. This challenge should be taken up in a resolute fashion by higher education institutions which should contribute to the development of national strategies to eradicate illiteracy, unemployment and mismanagement of local resources and wealth.

One of the basic elements underlying integration in the world economy lies in the enhancement of one's competitive arm which could be achieved only through control of science and technology, utilization of informatics, upgrading of the educational system and promotion of manpower's skills.

To face the cultural hegemony begotten by globalization, we should adopt, simultaneously, two complementary stances: interaction with globalization on the one hand and preservation of the Islamic cultural identity, on the other. Higher education should, therefore, heighten awareness about the new conditions of the world and the reality of globalization to contribute to social peace and cultural security.

Holding the most prominent standing on the educational hierarchy, higher education should contribute to the promotion of the other levels of education and upgrade their performance through provision of trained and highly qualified executives liable to enhance the training of teachers, work out appropriate curricula and address the different problems faced by education so as to gear the whole educational process towards the fulfillment of the requirements of comprehensive development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are some ideas which I was eager to present before your Conference and which constitute pivotal points of interest of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. I hope that they deserve, together with the numerous subjects featuring on your agenda, to be reflected on by experts and thinkers.

I wish your Conference every success and hope it will live up to the expectations of all humanity.

Wassalamu Alaikum Warahmatu Allah Wabarakatuh