

# **WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

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

### **Vision and Action**

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Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

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**Speech of Mr T.J. Alexander**  
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***From Higher to Tertiary Education: Directions for Change in OECD Countries***

The findings of the regional meetings leading up to this World Conference broadly align with those arising out of the OECD's education work programme. The OECD's recent publication, *Redefining Tertiary Education*, provides an account of significant trends and issues in a sector experiencing remarkable growth and change and offers new perspectives and concepts with a view to inform and strengthen policy development. The vision and directions set down in *Redefining Tertiary Education* have been discussed in several country-based seminars over the past two years and in a major conference convened in co-operation with the German authorities in Berlin in June. My remarks today draw from this work: an ongoing process of exchange, analysis, monitoring and debate within and among countries in the OECD area.

**The Forces at Play**

The issues and challenges giving rise to a greater interest in higher and tertiary education are familiar in the OECD area, and not necessarily unique to this group of countries nor new:

- restructuring in national economies, sometimes undertaken in anticipation of opportunities afforded by growing interdependence in all fields and wider integration of technological advances - - or sometimes in reaction to those developments -- but always giving greater weight to the skills, attitudes, and dispositions embodied in individuals;
- social aspirations, as levels of education, income and wealth continue to rise and, further, as the value of critical, reasoned knowledge assumes even greater importance in the pluralistic, democratic, market-economy countries which comprise the OECD Membership;
- and, perhaps paradoxically in the light of these strong demands for education, much greater competition for public and private resources.

I would make two observations here. First, it will be evident that these challenges apply to all levels and types of education -- not just higher or tertiary education. One implication of the present context is that no sector or set of institutions can set itself apart from the wider developments, expectations and constraints. Indeed, responses to the issues and challenges are to be found more broadly, and co-operatively. Second, while not new, the issues and challenges are combining to create a new context for education policies and programmes. It is with respect to this new context that new concepts are needed. Lifelong learning provides such a concept, offering a framework within which policies can be developed to address both the emerging expectations and constraints.

As used by OECD Education Ministers, lifelong learning emphasises a lifelong, 'cradle to grave' perspective, stresses continuity and transition, and focuses attention on learning and learners of all ages and not on sectors or boundaries -- whether with respect to contents, methods or contexts of teaching and learning. Lifelong learning is broader than recurrent adult and non-formal education, because it embraces all learning.

This broader view accords well with the OECD's use of the term *tertiary education*, in preference to more conventional terms 'higher education' or 'post-secondary education'. By *tertiary education*, the OECD refers to a level or stage of studies beyond secondary education which can lead to a qualification recognised on the labour market. It is undertaken in formal tertiary education institutions -- universities, polytechnics, colleges;

public and private -- but also in a wide variety of other settings including secondary schools, at work sites, via free-standing information technology-based offerings and a host of private and public entities.

This is a much broader reach than most conventional coverage of programmes and learning beyond secondary education. That broader reach seems warranted to account for significant changes in learning at this level: *expansion of demand and growing diversity*.

Growth has been dramatic in the OECD area. And, the underlying forces at play suggest a sweeping shift in orientation toward even higher levels of participation driven strongly by demands reflecting the diverse interests of clients rather than the supply-led, institution-directed expansion witnessed previously. Participation rates are now on a scale neither recognised nor envisaged in the early 1990s. One implication of the growth, therefore, is studies at the tertiary level are no longer reserved for a minority; to the contrary, movement is likely to continue in some countries toward near-universal participation and call for an inclusive rather than selective orientation in provision. This represents a significant change in perspective, raising far-reaching challenges for traditional and new forms of teaching and learning.

The second trend to note is diversity at the tertiary level of education. Diversity has taken several forms, in the first instance through different types of providers and new forms of self-learning. But, such formal differentiation needs to be seen in the light of a broadening and blending of tertiary education. Policy strategies which favour 'seamlessness' or a 'continuum' of learning' are, in some countries, encouraging such development. What is not driven by policy may occur as a result of 'strategic' decisions by individual institutions to enter into new relationships with different types of providers, both domestic and international. And perhaps the most important diversification is the result of decisions by the students themselves: students are 'blurring' the boundaries partly in order to better situate themselves with respect to employment prospects and adult life. As put in a recent OECD report, "many new pathways and combinations [of qualifications and learning options] are being created, no so much by deliberate policies pursued by national authorities or institutions, but rather by choices made by the students themselves". Beyond this, tertiary education is sought by learners with widely varying backgrounds and interests: young and mature-age, 'working' and 'inactive', full- and part-time, degree-seeking or personal interest, fee-paying and publicly-supported.

These patterns reflect the scale, breadth and diversity of participation at this, the tertiary, stage or level of education.

### **Directions for Policy**

The principal documents for review in this plenary -- the draft Declaration and the Action Plan -- usefully identify areas for reflection and action by governments, students and their families, institutional providers and their staff, local communities, employers and other concerned parties.

In an important sense, action already features in the present, dynamic policy environment at international, national, institution and programme levels. For OECD countries, one need look no further than the volume of policy activity: comprehensive reforms in structure, governance and finance in Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Belgium (Flemish Community), Portugal, Austria, Finland and the United Kingdom; qualification or curriculum proposals or initiatives in Mexico, Japan and Denmark (and, Mr. Jospin referred in the Opening Session of this conference to the commitment of Education Ministers in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom to 'harmonise' a first degree); more targeted initiatives concerned with financing in the United States and Canada; and quality reinforcement or assurance efforts in almost all OECD countries. The scale and depth of this policy activity makes it possible to speak of an OECD-wide reform movement. On the evidence of the reports from the regional meetings prior to this World Conference and the statements of over 100 Ministers in this plenary, policy formulation and initiative seem to characterise the present situation in a much wider range of national settings.

These are promising signs. They indicate why it is appropriate to have convened this World Conference and the importance of our discussions to strengthen and improve the value of those initiatives. Drawing on the OECD work, I would emphasise five principal orientations to continue to shape the policy thinking and initiatives already underway:

- an over-riding need is to focus attention on learning rather than on teaching. As already described, the growth in the numbers and diversity of students is leading to a variety of pathways and choices; these choices need to be acknowledged and pathways supported to a greater extent than at present. There need to be even greater options for students to decide when, where, how and what to study, recognising that participation in tertiary education is no longer to be seen as a 'one way - one time' activity for young adults: not only are mature age adults encompassed in this new vision, but for young adults learning at the tertiary level should enable them to prepare and re-equip themselves for careers over their lifetime.
- reducing the high rates of attrition, failure or drop-out, queuing for entry or delay to completion of degrees is now a matter of high priority. At a time when rates of participation in tertiary education approach or exceed -- and, sometimes substantially so -- half of a generation, high rates of failure or extended periods of study can not be seen as an indicator of quality. Rather, attention needs to be directed at programmes, teaching and learning which may be ill-suited to student backgrounds, learning needs and interests. But, an increase in the variety of pathways actually followed by learners at the tertiary level of education requires authorities and institutions to be clearer about the focus of policy approaches in this area: there are different motivations for undertaking tertiary-level studies (not always for degree completion) and very patchy -- and mixed -- evidence concerning the consequences of failure and dropping out. We need both to understand more about the meaning of drop-out, failure and delays to completion of a recognised qualification and to document more clearly what happens to those who fail -- or are failed by -- tertiary education.
- new, deeper partnerships with employers need to be developed and supported. The involvement of employees in advisory groups to refine and develop the content of courses in all studies leading to tertiary level qualifications is useful, but not sufficient to fully exploit the potential benefits to be derived from a greater *sharing* of responsibilities. A strategy for fostering closer co-operation with the business sector in programmes, teaching and learning -- via stages, student projects, part-time teachers from business and industry -- could enrich study programmes while making them even more responsive to the needs and backgrounds of young people and adults who are choosing not to pursue tertiary-level studies but who could potentially benefit from them. Such partnerships would be more strategic, taking an approach expressed in one country participating in the OECD tertiary education thematic review of 'working with the grain and harnessing employers ...'.
- management and leadership capacities in tertiary education need to be reinforced. At institution and system levels, there is a need for leadership and vision to comprehend more fully the wider terrain -- both to take into account the interests and experiences of learners and to identify the scope for exploiting co-operation and complementarity in provision offered outside of conventional boundaries of programmes and degree qualifications. In this respect, institutional and system managers must operate strategically, and countries will need to find the best ways to promote an appropriate balance of the interests for responsiveness and innovation on the one hand with the need for substantive forms of co-operation which limit the scope for institutional and programme initiative.
- resources will need to be mobilised from all sources to meet the costs. Increased allocations by governments are to be welcomed, not least because they back up the important public stake in an important human investment. But, alongside that substantial public stake, there is a need and place for -- and advantages from -- some participation from students and families as well as employers and other third parties in financing tertiary education costs. Countries moving in this direction are giving great attention to introducing new means to ensure that opportunities are not limited owing to any increase in costs faced by learners and their families. Here, it is best to avoid over-simplified approaches or solutions. The best approach is likely to be one that provides for and permits individual learners and their families to make use of a range of financing sources and methods, and which considers both short-term needs and long-term, life cycle consequences of the methods selected.

## Concluding comment

In sum, I am suggesting that there will be value in going beyond existing concepts and policy approaches in search of a vision and promising directions to meet the challenges and expectations for learners and learning at a level beyond secondary education. Partly to open up thinking, the OECD's Education Committee chose the term *tertiary education* to emphasise a variety of study options along a continuum rather than a hierarchy, to examine pathways and transitions and to draw attention to demand -- individual and social -- as a key driving force.

The OECD Education Committee was correct to see the present moment as an important turning point, where a shift in the balance from programmes and supply to learning and demand is gathering momentum 'on the ground' and, increasingly, at policy levels. This puts great pressure on all parties, but that pressure reflects the growing value of education as well as the new challenges and uncertainties. This assessment applies no less to tertiary education. The OECD report, *Redefining Tertiary Education*, puts the point this way: 'while the new contexts are often disturbing and perplexing, they are also rich in opportunities, providing scope for innovation and creativity. Those countries, systems and institutions that accept the challenges and seize the opportunities in a quest for new solutions seem likely to do best.'