

# **WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

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

### **Vision and Action**

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### **Education International (EI)**

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.

Education International (EI)

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**Speech of Mrs Mary Hatwood Futrell  
President of Education International**

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

Allow me to first thank Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, for organizing this World Conference on Higher Education. Congratulations to UNESCO for a broad debate which resulted in substantial discussions leading up to this meeting. Second, I am impressed with the large number of national representatives attending this conference. In particular, I am happy with the number of delegates participating from my home country, the United States of America. I interpret this as a first step towards the U. S. rejoining UNESCO.

Education, especially higher education, will increasingly take centre stage as nations try to use knowledge to understand and manage their economies and societies.

The challenges and policies of higher education institutions will be shaped by powerful external sources such as democratization, globalization, and the changing labour market. Changing demographics as more non-traditional students enrol will also shape higher education. As demands for higher levels of academic expectations, diversification of ways to provide higher education, and the limits on government funding will further impart the shape of these institutions.

Since its founding in 1993, Education International, which represents 23,000,000 educators world-wide, has recognized that it is essential for us to play an increasingly active role in the higher education sector. Not simply because nearly 1,000,000 lecturers, researchers and workers in higher education belong to organizations that are members of EI, but, because we firmly believe that today, as was true yesterday, and will be truer tomorrow, education; especially higher education will play a crucial role in the scientific, technological, and cultural life of a country.

A well-developed system of higher education, for instance, transmits existing knowledge and creates new knowledge and, thereby, fuels the global economy and the global society. A well-developed system of higher education also provides broad social benefits such as increased social cohesion, appreciation of diversity, quality of civic culture and ability to adapt to rapid technological change. These economic and social benefits based on the knowledge transmitted and generated by higher education also flow across borders and serve the international interests of the world as well as the national interests of individual countries.

Last spring, EI and UNESCO sponsored the **International Conference on Higher Education: A Teacher's Perspective**. The agenda was similar to this one. We talked about the fact that governments all over the world want to know how to deliver the highest quality education at the lowest possible cost. That in my opinion is the wrong issue. The real issue is not how much education costs, but how much it is worth. The real challenge is how do we ensure that all citizens of the world have access to education, including higher education; how do we develop the potential of our citizenry. Thus, it is in our interest to promote higher education.

Toward this end, I would like to speak to four points.

First, it is critical for colleges and universities to assure that high quality research and development define the foundations for improving teaching and learning. As was stated in UNESCO's seminal report, **Learning: The Treasure Within**: "It is primarily the universities that unite all the traditional functions associated with the advancement and transmission of knowledge: research, innovation, teaching and training, and continuing education." College and university faculty, including researchers, must be about the business of developing new knowledge, which will enhance all levels of education, including higher education. Speaking of business, in the business community it is not uncommon for 10-15% of the annual budget to be spent on research while on average most national governments spend less than 1% on educational research. National leaders are saying today that higher education research is crucial for the development of the economy and for society, for the ecological environment, and for culture, but at the

same time many of these same leaders are responsible for severe budget cuts and the worsening of learning and working conditions in higher education. We need to join together to persuade governments that it is in their best interests to significantly increase the level of funding for research at institutions of higher education. In addition, I would call upon all of us to establish as a priority on our research agenda the development of strategies to help developing countries enhance the quality of and expand access to higher education within their countries and abroad. We also need to devise ways to accelerate cooperation within all segments of the world-wide university community and to help build up research capacity in the developed countries. By forming this kind of international cooperation, all sides will benefit.

Directly tied to the issue of research and development are two related issues: academic freedom for faculty and institutional autonomy. EI's policy on higher education and research affirms that the State has a right and an obligation to insist on public accountability for the expenditure of public funds. However, such accountability should not undermine institutional autonomy in relation to academic policies, curriculum, staff appointments and internal management.

On this point, Member States of UNESCO should be encouraged to adhere to the terms of the **UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel**. Teachers and research workers are crucial to the delivery of the objectives of higher education, the maintenance of quality and the pursuit of scientific and social urgency, on which human development and the future of our planet depend. Yet, academic staff in most countries are undervalued. Their jobs and careers are threatened. Representative and collegial structures are under challenge. Education International strongly believes that the status and conditions of academic staff through academic freedom and union rights, must be addressed as a prerequisite for the achievement of the objectives of this UNESCO Conference.

The second point has to do with enhancing opportunities for women and other disenfranchised groups to have greater access to higher education. As was stated in the UNESCO discussion paper for this conference, significant progress has been achieved to enhance the access of women, cultural minorities, people with disabilities, and socio-economically deprived groups to higher education. However, various socio-economic, cultural and political obstacles continue in many places in the world to impede their full access and integration into the system. Overcoming these obstacles remains an urgent priority for ensuring an equitable and non-discriminatory system of higher education based on the principle of merit. More aggressive efforts are required to eliminate all stereotyping in higher education. Guaranteeing greater access to higher education for all guarantees our future. Not to do so is to reject the potential of a nation's future, a loss few nations can continue to afford.

The third way to help achieve this goal is through distance education. Distance education is one way to make sure that educational opportunities exist for people wherever they may live. It provides the opportunity to expand and diversify our programmes, delivery systems, and the degrees we offer, to create the "virtual university". Let me state unequivocally, however, that the focus of educational technology should not be on the physical tools, but on the quality of the design for the improvement of learning. In other words, our primary goal should not be simply amassing equipment, but to be academically excellent in all that we do.

Fourth, assuring access to higher education is predicated first and foremost on assuring access to quality primary and secondary education. We need to understand that ensuring quality at the higher education level will not occur without first assuring quality education within every grade level and subject at the primary and secondary levels. Conversely, the quality of primary and secondary education is contingent upon the quality of education acquired by teachers, counsellors, school administrators, and other educational employees who are critical players in the daily lives of our children. Studies show that if a child is taught for one year by a poorly qualified teacher that child will probably never educationally recoup the year he or she lost. Therefore, the change we are advocating, the transformation of teaching and learning must be systemic from pre-school through graduate school. Thus, teacher education should be a priority on every single university campus.

As I close, allow me to once again on behalf of Education International representing 250 teachers organizations in more than 145 countries congratulate UNESCO for its vision and action in convening this Conference. We in Education International stand ready to work with UNESCO and other groups to broaden access to higher education, improve its relevance and quality, and develop stronger links between higher education and the world of work. That is our goal!

Thank you.