

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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International Federation of University Women (IFUW)

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.

International Federation of University Women (IFUW/FIFDU)

**Speech presented by Mrs Linda Souter
Head of Delegation and IFUW President**

Mr President, Mr Director-General, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am speaking on behalf of the International Federation of University Women. As an international non-governmental organization with formal consultative status with UNESCO and a member of the NGO Collective Consultation on Higher Education, we would like to thank UNESCO for their support. We have valued our relationship with UNESCO over the past five decades. Our shared concerns, particularly in the area of education, have led to many opportunities for close cooperation, the most recent being our active involvement in the preparation of the World Conference on Higher Education.

Formed in 1919, IFUW now consists of more than 180,000 graduate women in 66 national federations and associations world-wide. We are committed to sustainable human development and peace through the promotion of education for women and girls, and the recognition and protection of human rights.

As advocates for gender equity, the promotion of lifelong learning and enabling graduate women to effect positive change in a rapidly changing society, we are vitally concerned with the role of higher education in human development.

We concur with the proposed emphasis placed on lifelong learning in the draft documents: the *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action* and the *Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development of Higher Education*. We are pleased to see that the role and participation of women has been articulated in the latest draft. However, we are concerned that the concept of gender equity has not been as clearly emphasized throughout these documents.

We note that the over all aim of the *Action Strategy for UNESCO's special project on Higher Education, Women and Development* is "to define and foster a gender-inclusive culture through education - and notably through higher education - so as to promote sustainable human development". If higher education is to be society's instrument to develop a culture of peace and sustainable human development founded on equity, justice, solidarity, and liberty, the importance and relevance of the gender dimension must be fully understood and addressed.

With the goal of making higher education being accessible to all, primary, secondary, continued learning and retraining programmes need adjustment to ensure this accessibility. Although overall enrollment figures for women and girls in secondary and higher education have increased, disparities still exist, particularly in the developing world. As women represent more than 50% of the world's population, national policy makers should ensure that the access to and participation of women in education at all stages of their lives is safeguarded and facilitated and that social, economic and political barriers are eliminated. Institutions of learning must be flexible and responsive to the needs of women throughout their lifespan for training and retraining, and take into account their often dual roles of caring for their families and life at work.

The role of poverty in preventing access to education, including higher education, needs to be addressed as education can often provide escape from cycles of poverty and deprivation - particularly for women and girls who constitute such a high proportion of the world's poor.

Women graduates are part of the essential human resource base of each country. Without equal opportunities for the same access and career opportunities a major section of the workforce will be under-utilized and the achievements of the next generation under-developed. Women still earn less on average than men with equivalent levels of education. Equal pay for equal work, as recognized by the Declaration of Human Rights, must be enforced legally by governments.

Successive UN Conferences over this past decade have emphasized the need for active participation of women in positions of power and decision-making to effect positive social change. The Platform for Action adopted at the 4th World Conference on Women states: "Without the active participation and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved". Higher education is the key to women reaching positions of power and decision-making in all sectors of society including educational institutions, government, business and industry. To reach a critical mass to effect change more women must be encouraged and supported to continue their education particularly in areas where they have been under-represented such as in science and technology. The *UNESCO special project Women, Higher Education and Development* which fosters training and research in fields related to the development process needs to be further developed and expanded.

Equitable distribution of women in leadership positions in both the academic and administrative spheres of educational institutions is essential. Women in these positions can serve as models and mentors for younger women. Without this real progress towards mainstreaming, gender issues in teaching, administration and research cannot be achieved. To achieve this, women need equitable access to career development, training, fellowships and grants. Training in leadership and management skills should be included in the curriculum.

Evaluation of success in academic careers should be more relevant to society and its changing needs. There needs to be more balance in recognition of academic achievement as currently market driven research has led to a system that tends to value short-term, income generating research over excellence in teaching and fundamental research. This tendency may inhibit career progress for both women and men. Teaching and tutorial responsibilities should be upgraded and quality assurance of teaching methods in higher education introduced.

Centers for Women's Studies provide excellent examples of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to education and research. However, such centers must not become female ghettos with authorities feeling that they have satisfied the demands for gender research simply by funding such centers.

Linkages between higher education and the world of work are increasingly important in a globalized economy. For graduates to find employment and respond to this changing society support structures are required, such as:

- criteria for determining equivalence of degree qualifications;
- development of opportunities for those less free to travel because of family commitments;
- reduction of the gap in facilities and opportunities between academic institutions in the South and the North;
- systems to allow for a more balanced world-wide academic exchange between educational institutions.

Women and men need to be full partners in developing a society based on equality, sustainable human development and peace in the 21st Century. For this, gender specific research is needed on the effects of globalization, changing patterns in political systems and economies and the use of the new technologies so that all can take advantage of new opportunities.

Progress cannot occur in isolation. Non-governmental organizations have proved that they have unique abilities for advocacy and capacity building. Only effective partnerships and collaboration with all stakeholders in higher education can ensure a successful outcome to this Conference.

Mr President, Mr Director-General, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your attention.