

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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Bahamas

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.

Bahamas

**Speech of the Honourable Dion A. Foulkes,
Minister of State for Education,
Bahamas**

Introduction

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

The government and the people of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas are grateful for the opportunity to address this special conference on Higher Education.

Indeed, It is an area of utmost importance as we move toward the new millennium. All of the areas being addressed are critical, but, in this short communication, time will permit us to focus only on three : access, new information technologies and quality assurance.

Access

The Bahamas is a country of 280,000 people scattered across more than thirty inhabited islands. Situated between Florida and Cuba, it covers an area of some 100, 000 square miles.

Higher education has long been recognized as critical to the social and economic development of our nation. The pursuit of this goal has taken on many different forms, notably: strong support for and involvement of our prestigious and world renowned regional institution, the University of the West Indies; the establishment of the College of Bahamas, and the granting of scholarships for study in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and other countries. In addition to the College of the Bahamas, there are other private post secondary institutions offering various courses of studies.

This investment in higher education has resulted in the emergence of a cadre of highly skilled professionals, capable of meeting the majority of the manpower needs in the country.

While these initiatives served to expose Bahamians to higher education, nonetheless, prior to the establishment of the College of the Bahamas, access was limited to comparatively few people. With the establishment of the College, opportunities for higher and continuing education increased significantly.

In 1973, for example, government scholarships granted for study abroad amounted to just over 100. In contrast, today, the College has an enrolment of approximately four thousand students, and continues to admit in excess of a thousand students annually. The beneficiaries of this increased access fall into a number of diverse groups, namely: high school graduates from urban and rural populations; persons who, in the absence of such opportunity, had been unable to benefit from a college education; working women with families and economically-disadvantaged persons. It gives us much pride that graduates of secondary schools across the country are represented in most of the disciplines offered at the college.

The college's extension centres in several of the islands outside the capital of our country have enabled the rural population to take advantage of higher education opportunities within their own communities. Further, with the availability of numerous government and private scholarships and awards, no student who meets the entry requirements of the college is refused admission because of financial circumstances.

Through the efforts of the continuing education and extension services department of the college, persons desirous of upgrading their secondary education are afforded opportunities to do so.

The Bahamas' long tradition of universal access to education at the primary and secondary levels has not resulted in the equitable representation of males in higher and continuing education. This is a challenge that continues to confront the Colleges of the Bahamas and indeed the entire country.

At the college, female students outnumber males by a ratio of 3:1. This gender imbalance is also reflected in the administration of higher education. The Bahamas' delegation would be grateful for the advice of member states that have been able to overcome this challenge.

New information technologies

The geographical nature of the Bahamas presents severe and costly challenges for the delivery of education and the equalization of opportunities in education. A most practical approach to equalizing opportunity in these circumstances is, of course, to embrace the benefits of new technologies.

The leadership of our college is vigorously seeking assistance which will enable it to acquire the facilities (software and hardware) that will allow for interactive teaching across distances. It is in this context that formal approaches have been made to UNESCO in respect of its considerable resources and expertise.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance has also been a primary concern for the government and persons charged with the responsibility for the administration and management of higher education.

Over the last two years, the Ministry of Education has been developing plans for the establishment of a National Accreditation Board. This Board will oversee standards in public and private post-secondary educational enterprises operating in the Bahamas and will offer accreditation for programmes being provided by these enterprises.

A proposal for quality assurance in the Bahamas as well as a proposal for the establishment of a secretariat for the Accreditation Board have also been developed.

Among the other steps taken to promote quality assurance is the institution of a moratorium on the approval of applications submitted by off-shore institutions wishing to offer educational programmes in the country. This was instituted in order to allow time for the setting in place of policies, procedures and other structures to govern the operations of off-shore institutions. A quality assurance unit within the Ministry of Education will manage the process.

Recently, the Ministry of Education supported the formation of the Association of Tertiary Institutions in the Bahamas (ATIB). Inaugurated on 16, January 1998, ATIB is mandated to promote acceptable educational standards in tertiary institutions and to advocate policies and procedures that will enhance the positive development of tertiary education.

Quality assurance initiatives at the college of the Bahamas, have included:

1. an aggressive faculty development policy which has allowed large numbers of lecturers to upgrade their credentials;
2. the streamlining of many of its academic policies;
3. the tightening up of its academic procedures and
4. the formation of linkages with professional bodies such as the Bankers' Institute of London.

In conclusion, Mr President, may I, on behalf of my delegation, the government and the people of the commonwealth of the Bahamas, thank you for the opportunity to address this landmark conference and to urge your positive response to our observations and recommendations.