

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

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.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

**Speech of the Hon. Alpian Allen
Minister of Education, Culture, Women's and Ecclesiastical Affairs**

Mr Chairman, Mr Director-General, Excellencies, Ministers and Heads of Delegations, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines as part of the wider Caribbean region, is happy to be participating in this first World Conference on Higher Education.

As we move into the twenty-first century, we welcome the opportunity to reflect on the processes and to take action as to the direction of higher education.

As all small states in the Caribbean, we recognize that our human resource is our greatest asset. We further recognize that with globalization, the upper information highway and the increasing obsolescence in society, one needs to have a population that is flexible, adaptable, and has the ability to continue to learn.

Our citizens must have the readiness to recognize and seize economic opportunities, which the global environment is presenting.

They must develop the capacity to create and take advantage of opportunities to control, improve, maintain and promote physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well being, and contribute to the health and welfare of the community and country as a whole.

They must also have an informed respect for our cultural heritage and that of others.

We fully endorse the Delors Report on education for the twenty first century, and the whole idea of a paradigm shift to life long education, in the promotion of a learning society.

We therefore see higher education, as being vital to the development of the human resource factor, thorough the steady output of graduates who are competent in their respective disciplines; graduates who are able to apply their new found competence in achieving excellence in society and who have a sense of social responsibility towards the achievement of the developmental goal of our society and the wider Caribbean region.

However, as a small developing country, we fully understand the reality of limited opportunities for our citizens to pursue tertiary level studies given the near prohibitive cost of higher education.

Small wonder, that as revealed in statistics earlier during this conference, that the opportunities for accessing higher education are seventeen time greater for those in the developing countries.

In this regard, we feel that tertiary level institutions must utilize a variety of modalities using the new technologies to widen access if we are to improve the chances of our people to access tertiary level education.

We are happy to report that we fully endorse, and are seeing benefits from, the various initiatives taken by our premier tertiary level institution, the University of the West Indies, to widen access. Inclusive of these is the move towards being a dual mode institution offering programmes by distance education. Thorough this modality, we will have many of our students accessing various programmes at the university level.

This said institution has also taken a proactive role in developing the capabilities of the various community colleges located in our several member states. In so doing, this will enable these colleges, inclusive of our own, to develop in collaboration with the university a number of degree programmes necessary to meet the manpower needs of our small states.

It is obvious that, with this initiative, there will be a need for quality assurance systems at the institutional, national and regional levels. We do recognize that the institutions are varying stages of development and this could mean different models with different purposes. We are confident that all models in the Caribbean region will consider quality in a holistic sense.

However, despite these initiatives taken by the university, we in St Vincent and the Grenadines are still concerned that with the escalating cost in tertiary education, we must find the right balance between that sector and basic education, which we are striving to improve. While we fully understand the need for tertiary level education, we are mindful that it must not be pursued at the expense of basic education.

This, therefore, means that in trying to ensure the right balance, it is necessary to engage a wide range of partnerships in the financing of education. The institutions, governments, and the rest of civil society must engage in a collaborative endeavour to achieve this goal.

We feel that higher education concerns must notably focus on the education of students however wide and varied the student population might be.

It is our opinion and desire that higher education must also be responsive to development needs and use its wide conceptual and intellectual resources to enhance quality and equity in national education systems, while at the same time providing solutions to problems affecting society.

We in St Vincent and the Grenadines and the wider Caribbean have great expectations for this conference. We will certainly endorse the declaration of the conference and it is our expressed hope that its recommendations will provide the framework for change and development in the whole thinking and process of higher education as we move into the 21st century.

I thank you.