

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

UNESCO, Paris, 5 – 9 October 1998

VOLUME V – PLENARY

Belarus

Note1: To meet UNESCO publishing standards, some editing of papers has been required.

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Belarus

**Speech of H. Exc. V. I. Strazhev
Minister of Education of the Republic of Belarus**

Higher Education in Belarus on the Way of Transformation

Mr Chairman,
Mr Director-General,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me express my gratitude to the organizers of the conference for the idea of convening a global forum on the questions of higher education. I am sure that this representative forum will become an important step forward in dealing with the issues of reforming higher education and increasing its role in the steady development of the world.

Speaking about the global problems of higher education it is relevant to mention a witty observation of the famous English scientist, Eddington, who said that when physicists started studying the structure of stars they found out that in fact they were still studying the structure of the atom. Just in the same way, while studying the global issues of the development of higher education each of us inevitably comes to the conclusion that many of these problems are characteristic of his country, too. Therefore, ways to tackle these problems in a specific country may be efficient for other countries.

The Republic of Belarus, which I represent, is a State with the population of ten million people situated in the centre of Europe. Our closest neighbours are Russia, Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States.

As a legacy of the Soviet Union our country has inherited a good system of education, including higher education. This system had certain indisputable advantages as it was of mass scope, free of charge, available to all layers of society and provided a high level of fundamental knowledge. At the same time we face the problem of bringing the system of education in conformity with new realities. The countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States are solving practically the same problems. These issues were discussed at the recent meeting of the CIS Council for Co-operation in the Sphere of Education which I have honour to preside.

Analysing seven years' experience of the development of the national system of education we have come to a conclusion which though absolutely evident is quite often not given due priority: while carrying out reforms, including in the sphere of higher education, it is impossible to succeed ignoring traditions which have taken roots in society, the character of school education and specific socio-economic conditions. Moreover, we are firmly convinced that the development of higher education based on the tendencies prevailing in the world and on other countries' experience should first and foremost proceed from internal conditions and possibilities.

That is why the Belorussian school has not taken the path of destruction. Instead, it is updating the existing system and making changes where all the necessary preconditions were set up.

What have we achieved during the period of existing as a sovereign State?

We have managed to avoid a sharp decrease in the quality of education and in the number of trained professionals. Moreover, while in Soviet times there were 190 students per 10 thousand people in Belarus, the last seven years their number has 25% increased and now we have 240 students per 10 thousand people. At the same time the structure of admittance to higher educational institutions has drastically changed. In 1998 admittance to economic, law and humanities faculties made up 50% of the total which is twice as much compared with Soviet times. In spite of the difficult economic situation we managed to preserve the teacher-student ratio which is 1 to 8-10. The prestige of the Bielorusian higher education abroad has increased.

At the same time we should admit that new problems have arisen. First, the increased demand for higher education was ensured mostly by a growing number of institutions charging fees. Second, we observe a disproportion between the demand for economists and lawyers and the number of students trained for these professions.

Speaking about the growth of payable forms of education it should be noted that it was ensured mostly by means of setting up non-governmental higher educational institutions in the 90s. Only children of well-to-do families could afford studying there. Thus, the possibility of getting a higher education depended to some extent on the income of the family. Today every fifth student studies at these institutions.

However, the availability of this form of higher education brought to light the necessity to fully ensure the rights of less well-to-do layers of society to receive a higher education. In this connection the government, having no opportunity to significantly increase the scope of free education took the following action: it increased admittance to State higher educational institutions on the paying basis, with the fee being much lower than that in non-governmental institutions and affordable for the prevailing part of the population. Moreover, students who study well can be exempted from paying for their education.

Let me mention some numbers. In 1998, 31,5 thousand people were admitted to State institutions on the free of charge basis (among them 23,5 thousand people studying on the day time basis and 7,7 thousand studying by correspondence), girls making up nearly a half of the number. 20,9 thousand people were admitted to State institutions on the paying basis (11,1 thousand studying on the day time basis and 9,8 thousand by correspondence).

I would like to remind you that in our republic admittance to State educational institutions follows the pattern existing in the former USSR, that is on a competitive basis after passing entrance examinations.

The recent experience has shown that school leavers in towns and cities have better chances to enter universities than their peers from rural areas, which can be accounted for by the disparity in the quality of education in the urban and rural school. At the same time distribution of talents does not depend on the place where a person was born and studied. Life proves that more often than not it is school leavers from rural areas who become most hard-working and diligent students. For example, almost half of the professors of Bielorusian universities come from the countryside, whereas rural schoolchildren make up only a quarter of the total number of school leavers.

Fully realizing the importance of observing the principle of social equality, over the last few years the government has been allocating entrance quotas for rural school leavers. At the same time we pursue the goal to preserve the ratio which existed between urban and rural school leavers. This year we the first time succeeded in it.

Now a few words about the problem of disproportion between the demand existing in the republic for economists and lawyers and the number of students trained for these professions. This problem is to a great extent connected with the activities of non-governmental higher educational institutions. The question is: should the government withdraw from solving this problem if the choice of the future profession is made by the student, if the student pays for the education and therefore the problem of finding the job is just a personal matter? Or should the government, without restricting the right to a higher education in general, introduce certain regulations which concern first and foremost admittance to law faculties? The final decision has not been taken yet. But, if the analysis of job placement of this year graduates shows that the number of lawyers surpasses the demand, the Ministry of Education will introduce quotas for admittance to these faculties, without decreasing, however, admittance to higher educational institutions in general.

The tendencies I was talking about are more or less characteristic of all the countries with economies in transition, which makes the increase of regional co-operation quite relevant.

One of the steps in this direction was setting up of the Council for Co-operation in the Sphere of Education of the CIS Member-States. Together we have managed to solve a number of problems which arose as a result of the breaking up of the USSR, to define major principles, conditions and stages of forming the comprehensive educational space.

We are making efforts to expand co-operation with other regions. In this connection I would like to express my gratitude to UNESCO for backing our initiatives in this sphere. For example, at the last meeting of the Council we discussed the issue of organizing in spring 1999 in Minsk a seminar on the problems of transforming the system of secondary education in the countries with economies in transition. UNESCO made a decision to conduct such a seminar under its aegis. We also place hopes for effective co-operation in the sphere of higher education.

It is evident that apart from the peculiarities characteristic of the countries with economies in transition, development of higher education in Belarus is to a great extent determined by the processes which are taking place in school on the threshold of the new century (and, naturally, the new millennium).

To characterize these processes more vividly I would take as a starting point the year 1951 when I started school at the age of seven. Among the audience I can see a lot of people of my age who know quite well what kind of school it was.

What has changed since then? Obviously, the teaching process is provided with better technical facilities, there have been great changes in the contents of specific school disciplines. But such changes are typical not only of the second half of the XXth century. It would be no revelation if I say, and it has a direct relation to our conference, that those who come to school today live in a different environment which if not directly, then significantly influences not the object of studying (i. e. the system of knowledge), but rather the subject of teaching, i. e. the school child and the student.

In the 1920s of this century Mr Vladimir Vernadsky, Russian scientist, Mr Le Roy, French mathematician, and Mr Teilhard de Chardin, paleontologist and religious philosopher, promoted the idea of noosphere – an artificial environment where scientific and technical developments which determine the life of a contemporary human being play as large a role as the biosphere itself which remains the cradle of mankind.

Information revolution and information society are derivatives from the notion of noosphere. They are in fact one of the stages of the development of noosphere and are manifested in such global phenomena as international interactive means of communication and the rapid development of semiotics. A school child today is in many respects a product of noosphere. It means that the approach to upbringing and teaching cannot be the same as half a century or twenty, thirty years ago.

It stipulates a new understanding of the individual, the importance of his bonds and relations and changes in the very approaches to teaching.

Today the school is called upon not only to teach a person to live in nature and with nature, but, and this is the essence of the processes going on today, to prepare him for life in the noosphere. And if earlier it was a derivative as it were from solving the first task, today it should be given priority. It calls forth the necessity to reinforce the component pertaining to the humanities at every stage of education, beginning with primary school and finishing with university. Let me mention in this respect that one of the peculiarities of the Soviet system of higher education was the fact that social sciences including humanities were an obligatory component of the teaching process and made up about 25% of the total amount of the disciplines taught at universities. It could be accounted for by two main reasons: the educational one as the term of learning at school was curtailed and the ideological one. Given the fact that these issues are no longer relevant we should make full use of the opportunity to receive a comprehensive humanitarian education, for the problems brought about by the technocratic way of life of modern society require reinforcement of humanitarian trends in education and fostering of civil education.

The above mentioned determines other trends in the development of higher education. As the diversity of nature, first of all of the biosphere, has at one time determined the necessity of various branches of science and school disciplines, so the processes of development aimed at creating less and less probable structures, which according to Teilhard de Chardin are typical of the noosphere, dictate the necessity to give up rigid standardization in the system of higher education.

This presumes the diversification of higher education according to the types of higher educational institutions and terms of study, setting up of a multi-level, but at the same time the integrated system of professional education, the rejection of the limited professional training and at the same time the use of specific specialization at the last stage of education.

Undoubtedly, solving the above mentioned problems will require reforms in a secondary school, such as determining optimum terms of learning and bringing its objectives, contents and technologies of teaching in conformity with the objectives of the transformation of higher education.

In conclusion I would like to say that acknowledging the important role of public institutions and society in general in determining the ways for the development of higher education, we should not forget about the responsibility which lies with the government bodies in the sphere of education, for new ideas, however great they are, can be carried out only when they take the shape of practical actions.

Thank you.