

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

UNESCO, Paris, 5 – 9 October 1998

VOLUME V – PLENARY

Cyprus

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.

**Speech of Mr Lycourgos Kappas
Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Cyprus**

1. Higher Education in Cyprus

The Cyprus Government expresses its delight, pleasure and congratulations to UNESCO for organizing this World Conference on Higher Education.

The establishment of the independent Republic of Cyprus in 1960 provided the impetus towards the creation of institutions of higher learning. Although two institutions had been offering vocational programmes since the 50s, public technical schools were established during the 60s and 70s and private ones started offering courses of study in the 80s.

Traditionally, Cypriot high school graduates followed higher education in large numbers abroad, mainly in Greece and the United Kingdom. More recently a large number have turned to local institutions such as the recently established University of Cyprus which accepted its first students during the academic year 1991-92. In a small society like Cyprus with limited options in career development, Cypriots rated education as a high valued career tool, since through proper education, they were more or less guaranteed a decent way of life. Among the younger generations of Cypriots, the proportion of those with university education compares very well with their counterparts in Western Europe and North America. More than 63% of high school graduates pursue higher education in Cyprus or abroad.

2. Principal Themes of the Conference

Focussing on the principal themes of the conference, we present the structure of our system, the existing provisions, and our vision for higher education in the twenty-first century.

2.1 The Pertinence of Higher Education

We start from the principle that, anyone who has the capability for higher education should have the opportunity to benefit from it and the chance to contribute with his/her ideas to its advancement. We also believe that knowledgeable and scientifically informed citizens are better equipped to set and achieve aims and objectives. In particular, the aims and objectives of higher education should therefore enhance the ability of the student:

- to work independently in a learning environment;
- to undertake tasks in a responsible way;
- to look for quality and obtain high levels of achievement;
- to apply theoretical knowledge to real life situation;
- to widen his/her horizons through academic research.

In the process of implementing the above principles, the Government through a legal framework provides access to higher education institutions for all students who have successfully completed twelve-year primary and secondary education. However, due to limited resources, entrance to public institutions is guaranteed only to those who pass the examinations, held by the Ministry of Education and Culture every June. The fees for the public institutions are paid by the State. Private institutions accept students satisfying their requirements, but fees are paid by the students. Foreign students are accepted under similar conditions but the fees are higher.

2.2 The Quality of Higher Education

Quality in higher education is desirable and required by employers in both private and public sectors, but unless certain monitoring proceedings and criteria for excellence are satisfied, the word may be empty of content.

In public higher education, apart from the university which is autonomous and has its own academic standards, quality at other institutions is fostered by:

- (i) the competitive entrance examinations;
- (ii) the choice of the teaching staff, and
- (iii) the control by the corresponding Ministry.

Academic research is mostly conducted within the university, but research in special areas of technical or social interest is being undertaken by public or private non-university institutions.

2.3 The Management and Financing of Higher Education

The long-term policy of the Government with respect to higher education can be summarized as follows:

- expanding university education to areas like medicine, engineering and law, which are very popular for Cypriot students;
- upgrading the quality of private higher education with strict student selection procedures, and provide for the development of the teaching staff;
- targeting academic research and high technology excellence so that Cyprus may become a centre of educational services for the region.

The Government provides, through its annual budget, the sources of finance for the university and the other public institutions of higher education. Private tertiary schools are financed almost exclusively from their students' fees.

2.4 International co-operation in higher education

Cyprus participates in the European Programmes SOCRATES, LEONARDO and YOUTH FOR EUROPE, which have been designed to promote co-operation in higher education and improve teaching and learning towards a society of knowledge, peace, democracy and tolerance.

Academic mobility and solidarity is encouraged through the SOCRATES Subprogramme ERASMUS and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

Following the signing of the Lisbon Convention for recognition of higher education qualifications, the European Committee Directives and Law 68(I)/96, the Republic of Cyprus has proceeded to establish its own "NARIC", the Cyprus Council for Recognition of Qualifications of Higher Education.

The four year university programme which leads to the first final degree (Ptychio), is well accepted by leading foreign institutions as a sound basis for postgraduate Masters and Ph.D degree programmes. Similarly, graduates from non-university institutions often transfer their credits to foreign universities and continue to obtain a university degree.

The brain drain of university graduates was an acute problem until recently, because the vast majority of our students were obtaining their education abroad, and many exceptional students continued their career in the country they finished their studies. Since the establishment of the University of Cyprus, and the raising of standards by our private schools of higher education, there have been more teaching opportunities for young graduates to return home for an academic or professional career.

3. Challenges and Vision

Entering the twenty-first century, the world globally and each society separately are confronted with big challenges regarding higher education. For example we must,

- accept the massification of higher education but keep the quality, through hard work, at high levels. Youngsters who enter higher education should be encouraged and advised not to forget Archimede's words that "there is no royal path to Geometry";

- examine ways of enhancing the connection of higher education to the real world of work, but keeping the autonomy of the university and the freedom of the academics and students intact;
- offer equal opportunities to all prospective students, regardless of sex, colour, race, social background or physical disability, provided they have the capacity to complete the programme of their choice;
- provide the chance to all citizens to add to their knowledge and education, through organised full time, part time or distance learning programmes, taking full advantage of the rapid expansion of the world of technology.
- investigate the possibility of broadening the range of financial resources to cover the cost of higher education.

In line with the expectations of the people for access to higher education the State should foresee the needs of the entire population and advise and direct people to make wise decisions for the benefit of themselves and the society in general.

The State should develop appropriate mechanisms so that each citizen is kept informed not only of the opportunities ahead of him, but also to understand and accept his/her own limitations, through frequent objective assessment.

An appropriate mechanism should also be developed by the State so that it will enable each citizen to certify his/her knowledge or training, and use it to fulfil his dreams and aspirations, and enjoy job satisfaction.

Our conference is working towards these objectives. We look forward to its results, which will be significant for all of us and on which we shall rely as guidelines for vision and action.