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Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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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.

Germany

**Speech of Mrs Gabriele Behler
President of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education
and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany
Minister for Schools and Further Education, Higher Education and Research
of North Rhine-Westphalia**

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

UNESCO deserves our gratitude and recognition for taking on the task of organizing this conference.

This occasion offers us the much-needed opportunity to address the challenges facing the higher education sector and to reach agreement on models of cooperation.

It seems that the twenty-first century will be - in so far as we can look into the future - the century of knowledge and revolutions in knowledge.

Certainly events are taking place at largely varying times and are evaluated differently at the international level. Yet it is clear that the exchange and competition of knowledge and ideas will make a much stronger mark on our world in future. Our world will grow even smaller.

As we move into the society of knowledge, education and especially institutions of higher education will play a central role. They face a special challenge and the demands on them will grow.

Against this background, it is important for me to stress that education and free access to it are essential not only to the development of the economy.

They are in particular also essential to society and the individual.

They are also an integral part of the human right to development as demanded for individuals and peoples by the United Nations General Assembly.

It is an important signal that the „World Declaration on Higher Education“, which has been prepared as the final document of our conference, rejects educational models based purely on free-market principles. These models hold the danger that education will be accessible only to those who can afford to pay for it.

Yet the World Declaration underlines forcefully that education is a public asset, an asset to which everyone must have access. I am convinced this applies not just at national but also at international level.

The results of this conference will form an important basis for the forthcoming decisions on the development of our institutions of higher education.

However, the factual questions which count are so complex that they cannot be dealt with in a brief speech, even if the focus is on the main issues.

I should like therefore to concentrate on comments relating to one aspect which, however, seems to me to be one of the key concepts for worldwide trends and thus for future cooperation between higher education institutions.

I am talking about international mobility.

Mobility is one of the key features of the worldwide processes that we describe generally as globalization.

The movement of goods, production services, capital, knowledge and work as well as of people is increasingly changing industry and politics, not to mention our living conditions.

The people living in the western industrialized nations often view these trends and their consequences with concern. They are wary of change and worry about their vested rights.

On the other hand I hold a different view. Increasing internationalization by no means only involves risks and uncomfortable challenges.

It offers new opportunities, including opportunities for a fairer distribution of assets and for improved exploitation of resources. It offers the opportunity of bringing people together and intensifying cultural exchange. And this means, first and foremost, new hope for peaceful cooperation among peoples.

So there are certainly not just economic reasons why „qualifying for mobility“ has to be one of the central educational goals of our higher education institutions.

The first step will have to be a critical assessment of the current situation.

We have certainly made progress in Germany and in Europe. The major mobility programmes of the European Union, for instance, have borne fruit. After all, ten per cent of German students well into their degree courses, pursue their studies abroad.

However, looking to the future, this is certainly not enough. Further efforts are needed which should not just start in higher education institutions.

It is in schools that the foundations must be laid for helping young people to cope in unfamiliar cultures and to perceive new surroundings not as a threat but as a life-enriching experience.

For higher education institutions, studying abroad must increasingly become part of the education process. Studies, in particular, offer scope for encounters and social and cultural exchange, which are ultimately an important basis for productive and trusting cooperation in the business and academic worlds.

Mobility offers students not only the scope to broaden knowledge of their own subjects. It also offers the major opportunity to acquire „extrafunctional skills“, that is personal, social and cultural skills, such as:

- the ability to adapt without losing one's individual personality;
- receptiveness to new and different ideas;
- the ability to assert oneself;
- flexibility;
- and the readiness to cooperate with people of different educational backgrounds and origins.

These skills are absolutely vital in the society of knowledge, which is constantly subject to rapid change.

They must be just as much an integral part of professional qualifications as is the ability to communicate in a foreign language at least about topics related to the particular subject studied. Incidentally, this language needs not always or only be English.

Mobility means openness and exchange. Those promoting mobility cannot do so exclusively for the students in their own countries; rather, they must also be ready to receive students and aspiring academics from abroad.

However, in our efforts we are often confronted with very differently organized education systems. There are many obstacles to mobility such as differing lengths of periods of schooling and varying entrance requirements or study qualifications.

There are also problems with funding periods of study abroad and acquiring recognition for qualifications attained abroad.

I am not advocating a worldwide harmonisation of education systems. However, I would like to call upon higher education institutions to create in their study courses the kind of interfaces that would make it easier for students to spend some time studying abroad.

Pragmatic recognition of academic achievements already gained would doubtless make the decision of going abroad easier for many students.

Despite all the differences, recognition of academic results achieved and qualifications attained can be greatly simplified, for instance, through:

- transparently organized study systems;
- modular study structures;
- comprehensibly documented academic performance;
- and examinations taken in conjunction with courses of study.

The Federal Republic of Germany is making intensive efforts to reduce obstacles to mobility.

We are working towards facilitating the access of foreigners to higher education institutions and towards handling the provisions of legislation relating to foreigners in a more student-friendly manner.

We offer specific programmes to prepare prospective students for study in Germany, and efforts will be made at our higher education institutions to facilitate the recognition of study achievements and examination results gained at the home university.

We have initiated changes to course structures which will make it easier for students from many countries to integrate into the curricula of our higher education institutions.

Special study courses will be developed for foreign students where appropriate.

We also wish to improve the supervision of foreign students and, above all, we are sticking to the principle that tuition in Germany should remain free of charge for foreigners - at least until the first professional qualification is gained.

Of course, we are also seeking to encourage even more German students to embark on a period of study abroad.

We support the major European mobility programmes. At the same time, we take the view that mobility should not be restricted merely to Europe.

Emmanuel Kant, the great German philosopher, once said that the need to decide was often of greater significance than the opportunity to recognize.

This is especially true in these times of upheaval, disparity and confusion, which we are currently experiencing. This certainly also applies to many aspects of education policy, with which we are trying to prepare for a still unknown century.

As far as promoting international mobility is concerned, the issue is beyond dispute. It is necessary to all our interests.

Yet mobility must not be the preserve of the privileged few. In particular, international solidarity is required to give young people from all countries the opportunity to study abroad.

A broad international offensive is needed to promote international mobility.

I am convinced that every effort made will be a valuable contribution towards our common future.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your attention.