

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century Vision and Action

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Iceland

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

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Iceland

**Speech of Mr Björn Bjarnason
Minister of Education, Science and Culture of Iceland**

All over the world, we see the same trend: more and more people are moving into higher education. Universities and colleges are facing new demands, and their contribution to the development of our society is becoming more and more important. In the age of information, the standing both of individuals and of nations depends on their level of education and the attention they give to study and research.

Higher education institutions must always be the standard-bearers of those who seek to cultivate independent thought and expression, whether on complex or simple matters. There are various ways in which they can play this role. It is up to the politicians to find the best ways to enable each institution to grow and develop on its own terms, representing financial restraint and guaranteeing the quality standards necessary so that the students receive the best education and services.

In Iceland new legislative measures have been taken to enhance democracy within universities, and seek at the same time to increase streamlining and efficiency on their administrative side.

The universities have got greater independence and power was transferred from the Ministry of Education to the educational institutions themselves.

The role of the university is not limited to the cultivation of academic knowledge and skills. It is also to promote the application of knowledge, the advancement of education and the cultivation of national culture. This can be done in various ways, for example by offering re-education and extension courses and inform the general public of advances in knowledge and research. A university should play a prominent role in making people aware of the most important features of the nation it is serving. In addition, a university should be instrumental in opening the way for knowledge and ideas from abroad into the country and so to give the nation the strength necessary to tackle new challenges.

In view of the constantly growing number of students the universities have asked for broader mandate to set entrance rules for individual faculties. This has now been provided for in the new Icelandic legislation. Entrance requirements and study standards shall be in accordance with international standards.

The new University Act provides for a seat of all stakeholders on the board of governors of the universities. Teachers and students have the right to elect members on the board and the Minister of Education appoints members from outside the institution. These members on the board from outside the universities are one of the main conditions for their increased autonomy in the management of their internal affairs. The transparent accountability to the government and parliament is also guaranteed by this new order.

The rector has the ultimate responsibility for the hiring of all university employees. In this connection the importance of a vigorous policy of staff development for universities should be stressed.

All state-run universities receive an independent allocation from the national budget. The aim is to conclude an agreement with each institution for services and projects to be executed on behalf of the state in return for the financial allocations, making it possible for the university to assume increased operational autonomy. Allocations to cover teaching costs are based on the number of students in full-time study.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We want our universities to be independent institutions where all stakeholders can play a role.

At the same time as we are putting the new University Act into force, we are writing a new general curriculum for upper secondary education. Our aim is to establish a strong and flexible upper secondary school system to nurture the individual and give the pupils a wider choice of studies, while at the same time encouraging them to develop sound and disciplined working methods, take pride in their work and accept responsibility for their own studies.

These requirements are in accordance with the prediction that mass production will continue to decline, making room for more differentiated and flexible work organization, higher level of individual autonomy and entrepreneurship. This means that the economy will need well trained individuals who are open to changes but also have a solid knowledge and skill foundation to build on. Lifelong education is the best way to adapt the individual to new demands of industry and society.

The competition between nations for well qualified people will increase as the students and the work force become more mobile. In order to survive such a competition, language training, the use of information technology, and education on society and the international system has to be increased. Academic staff will have to keep up with new requirements, by embracing the concept of lifelong education.

The new technologies open a new dimension in education. In Iceland universities have decided to offer distance learning in all fields, and one may say that a new educational network is being built, which has no boundaries. Higher education is now available to everyone from anywhere in the world at any time if they do have access to the Internet. The positive effect of this knowledge revolution is obvious to all.

Utilization of knowledge is the utilization of human resources. It is only by raising the knowledge and skill level of the population that countries can hope to remain competitive. In this context we must pay due attention both to the elite and to those who have not been as successful in coping with the demands of education and industry. All the machines and equipment in the world are meaningless if we do not have the will, the knowledge and the imagination to use them in a productive way.

Let us make a commitment at this World Conference on Higher Education to the aim of increasing the human resources by raising the quality of education at all levels and especially to strengthen the university level so it will be able to cope with ever increased demands from society.