

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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Norway

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.

Norway

**Speech of Mr Jon Lilletun
Minister of Education, Research and Church Affairs of Norway**

The UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education takes, as one of its starting-points, the principle of equity of access to higher education. The importance of this principle is shown by the fact that it is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It applies in a global as well as a regional and national perspective. In Norway and the other Nordic countries, it lies at the core of our thinking about education in general and higher education in particular.

Norway has proposed several amendments to the documents to be adopted by this conference which underline and reinforce the principle of equity of access. One aspect which we have stressed is the participation of women, another the crucial importance of avoiding exclusion due to insufficient financial means. Not least, we have stressed the importance of partnership between institutions of higher education in the developing and the developed world as a means of reducing inequality on a global scale. We believe that such efforts should take place in the context of national priorities in the developing countries, and thus aim at maximum national ownership of the projects in question.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my satisfaction with the thorough process of consultation leading up to the World Conference, which ensures that the stakeholders in higher education in all parts of the world have been able to contribute their views. This is the best possible guarantee of an outcome, which can fulfil the ambitious goal of drawing up a new agenda for higher education in the 21st century.

One aspect of education, which is now very much in focus, is life-long learning. Everyone seems to agree that life-long learning becomes increasingly necessary as the world is changing ever more rapidly. In this context it is essential that everyone receives a basic education which prepares them for further learning later. Life-long learning also contains an element of equal access, as it means opening the education institutions to a new group, that of adult learners. This will have profound implications everywhere. To accommodate adults, higher education must become more diversified and flexible, while preserving its core values of academic excellence, critical rigour, independent thinking and high ethical standards.

At the same time, one must not lose sight of the basic conditions of education. For a long time, elimination of illiteracy has been one of UNESCO's main priorities. In the developed world, *functional* illiteracy is a serious problem in spite of statistically high literacy rates. Large numbers of people are excluded from participation in education, working life and society in general because they are functionally unable to understand a written text. Illiteracy substantially reduces quality of life for the individual, and constitutes a problem for any nation in a world where the ability to compete in a globalized market depends to an increasing degree on a highly educated workforce.

In Norway this year, a National Adult Learning Week was arranged as part of the follow-up to the CONFINTEA V International Conference on Adult Education. The opening of the week coincided in time with International Literacy Day, (September 8th, 1998). This may serve to underline the connection between adult learning and literacy, and the importance of taking seriously the challenge of providing every individual with a basis for self-realization and participation.

Those who are to teach people, whether children or adults, to read and write, are themselves educated in the higher education institutions. This illustrates the importance, and the responsibility, of higher education for the quality of the education system as a whole, and in a wider sense for a well-functioning society. In our discussions of what higher education should be in the 21st century, we must not focus narrowly on academic or technical knowledge, but keep this broader social perspective in mind.

Students must be enabled and encouraged not only to gain knowledge in their respective fields, but to develop the values, interests and skills required to participate in cultural and political life and in civic society in general. In short, they must be trained to become *citizens*. It is my belief that participation by students in the various decision-making bodies of higher education institutions constitutes excellent training in democracy. Besides, student involvement is essential for improving quality. On the one hand, active students help create a good learning environment, and on the other, if we want to make higher education better, it is essential to ask the opinion of those who benefit directly from it.

The World Conference on Higher Education is a unique forum where stakeholders in higher education from all over the world have the opportunity to listen and to learn from each other. The documents adopted by the conference will be studied everywhere. This entails an obligation for all of us to ensure that the conference will realize its potential as a guiding light for higher education in the 21st century. The immediate aim, an ambitious one in itself, is to lay the foundations for a reform of higher education on a global scale. The ultimate aim, however, must be to use education as a tool for making the world a better place to live. Our debates must always be informed by this perspective, and thus by the values at the heart of UNESCO's work in the field of education: equality, citizenship, participation and democracy together with a global culture of peace.