

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

UNESCO, Paris, 5 – 9 October 1998

VOLUME V – PLENARY

Poland

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.

Poland

**Speech of Prof. Mirosław Handke
Minister of National Education of Poland**

In considering the future of higher education it's worth going back to the idea of the university once again. This concept was really born at the beginning of the second millennium, and truly blossomed and became prevalent at its end.

The university has been subject to evolutionary changes, most importantly (although Europe is its birthplace) it became widespread all over the world, throughout the cultures.

I am not exaggerating when I say that the development of our civilization, so rapid at the end of this millennium, would not be possible without the concept of the university.

In my opinion this wonderful fruit of European culture has several attributes that have made the idea of university so important to civilization:

- 1) the community of those who teach and those who are taught (*universitas*);
- 2) the joining of research and teaching;
- 3) freedom in searching for the truth;
- 4) a broad-range of interests (there were four basic faculties in the Middle Ages: theology, law, medicine, and philosophy);
- 5) equal access to the university (not only those of noble birth in the Middle Ages).

All of these traits were components of the university concept. There is no doubt that in the next millennium the functioning of academic institutions shall be based on these qualities.

Attempts have been made at revising these fundamental principles of university, but they have always ended up in the loss of the university's civilization-oriented functions. The fatal consequences of gross rejection, even in part, of these university traits was especially evident in totalitarian countries. An attempt was made to replace the academic community with the superior authority of teachers, to conduct research separately from teaching, and to establish institutions of higher learning with a narrow specialization. I do not have to add that both the search for the truth and access to the university were limited.

Unfortunately in my country as well, where the university tradition has been in tact since the 14th century, higher education has, to a large degree, stepped away from the traditional concept of university.

Following the fall of communism one of the first laws passed by parliament was the higher education act, which in ensuring autonomy for universities brought back its classic university traits.

As of 1990, the year the law was introduced, public and private higher education developed. The number of students grew almost three-fold. In excess of 1.1 million students, or more than 30% of all youth between 19 and 24 years of age, began studying in this new academic year. I do not have to convince anyone that this was possible thanks to the tremendous efforts of the university community.

We are also witnessing a trend of consolidation of schools with a narrow specialization into large integrated university-type organisms.

The market economy introduced in my country, along with changes the social and political systems have undergone, has put new problems before universities that the institutions of highly developed European countries have already faced. This primarily pertains to the primacy of market mechanism on the traditional European model of culture. In our conditions this means turning the attention of part of the teachers away from teaching mission and scientific research towards more profitable lines of business in other business and social fields.

It can also be expected that in reply to social demand in Poland universities will expand and give elasticity to the classic type of university education offered and shall introduce vocational training, too. So therefore besides the classic didactic/raising and research functions, the university shall be charged with a new job – preparing young people for the labour market. This function is a reaction to the progressive accumulation of higher education and increasingly greater social pressure.

However, I am convinced that trends observed in Polish universities do not pose a threat to the concept of the university and are only the symptoms of adapting this institution, many centuries old, into our new reality.