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Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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Botswana

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.

Botswana

**Speech of Hon. Dr. G K T Chiepe
Minister for Education**

Honourable Chairperson
Vice Chairpersons
Rapporteur-General
Mr Director-General
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour and privilege for me as head of the Botswana delegation to be accorded this opportunity to address this august audience of delegates attending the World Conference on Higher Education, the first of its kind to be organized and hosted by UNESCO.

Allow me, Chairperson, to commend the Director-General, his staff and the experts commissioned by UNESCO for the diligence and admirable thoroughness with which the conference documents have been prepared. The extensive consultation with Member States through their National Commissions and through the five regional conferences have ensured that the documents before us are a true reflection of the views expressed by all stakeholders whose area of work and expertise are in consonance with UNESCO's competence.

With much work having been done in the areas of basic education for all, secondary education, and technical and vocational education, the focus on higher education, which is the subject of this conference, is the natural next link in the educational chain. Chairperson, Botswana believes that the role and the function of higher education systems and institutions need to be re-examined in the light of the rapid and far-reaching phenomenon of globalization which is characterized by, among other things, a world-wide explosion in the generation of knowledge, rapid global developments in science and technology - particularly information technology and electronic communication systems, and the opening up of national economies through deregulation of trade and finance.

Globalization demands and shall increasingly demand the existence of trained and educated personnel who have the capacity and capability to service and develop a world described by Philip C. Candy as experiencing "rapid pace of social technological, cultural, economic, legal and educational change". The higher education system in particular is therefore challenged to nurture and to provide in quantity the human resources whose key qualities are adaptability, flexibility, and responsiveness - especially among teachers.

Our observations and experience suggest that higher education systems have generally not demonstrated an inherent capacity to adapt to, forecast, anticipate and therefore play a leading role in determining the direction of technological and societal changes. The essential purpose of our meeting here in Paris is to address the challenges, opportunities and tasks that higher education faces as we enter the new millennium. Our expectation is that by the end of this week's discussions and debates we shall have arrived at a strategic blueprint for higher education in the 21st century - "Towards an **Agenda 21** for Higher Education" to quote the title of Working Document ED-98/CONF.202/6 of this conference.

The four themes of this conference are:

- Pertinence (or Relevance)
- Quality
- Management and Financing
- International Cooperation.

In order even to begin to be able to assess the relevance, the quality, the management and financing, and the extent of the international collaboration and cooperation of a higher education system, there should first be access to the system.

Chairperson, I therefore deal briefly with the issue of access and its attendant challenges and problems before turning my attention, equally briefly, to the main themes. Throughout I shall draw on our experience in Botswana to underscore and emphasize certain points which we believe are of general significance for higher education systems and institutions.

Equitable access to higher education on merit should be guaranteed for all who qualify regardless of age, gender and ethnic origin. The concept of merit propounded in Article 26 paragraph 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights raises a number of concerns which include

- the capacity of institutions of higher education to absorb all learners who qualify on merit for admission;
- the ability of Member States to finance the realization of this fundamental right;
- the provision of a relevant and high quality curriculum diverse enough to cater for all talents, aspirations and professional needs; and
- the recruitment and retention of high quality academic staff by the higher education system.

It is an undeniable fact that institutions are not able to admit all learners, especially adult learners, who qualify for higher education due to competing demands for resources in the economy. As a means of absorbing more adult learners into a system of continuing education and learning, Botswana endorses the Hamburg Declaration and The Agenda for the Future which were adopted at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education in July, 1997. These called upon the present World Conference on Higher Education "to promote the transformation of post secondary institutions into lifelong learning institutions, and to define the role of universities accordingly".

The concept of lifelong learning has become central to current thinking on the role and the process of education and training and it behoves higher education institutions to devise ways and means of providing continuing and lifelong learning. Transformation in this direction should not only increase access to higher education but should also cause institutions of higher learning increasingly to be viewed as forms of community learning centres whose lecture theatres, laboratories and libraries might receive considerably more intensive use than they do at present.

The concomitant need for greater articulation of the higher education system with the world of work and with the school system poses immense curricular challenges. The requirement is for a greater breadth of scope and diversification in order for the higher education curriculum to be inclusive of the various types of knowledge and professional skills required by modern society.

Honourable Chairperson, affordability is yet another challenge. Can all states afford to finance higher education for all those who qualify? The answer is that it is difficult to do so. That being the case, what is the way out? The regional conferences have arrived at a consensus on the issue of the financing and management of higher education. This is that the State has a major responsibility for ensuring that higher education is guaranteed resources from the public purse. Botswana has long endorsed this position. In addition to providing free primary and junior secondary education, the Government underwrites the cost of higher education through budgetary subventions in excess of 95% and provisions of loans or grants to learners.

However, the proceedings of the regional conferences show that there is also agreement that diversification of funding sources and the deliberate development of an accountable and anticipatory system of governance will be essential ingredients of the future financing and management regime of higher education. Botswana, through its University of Botswana, is beginning to confront the strategic challenges arising from these two issues. There are no easy answers to the questions raised by the issue of affordability and it shall be an important aspect of the business of this conference to point the way forward.

Chairperson, Botswana has identified some of the challenges and problems posed by consideration of access, quality and relevance, management and financing, and, most recently, international co-operation in higher education. The Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 recommended the establishment of a Tertiary Education Council which would provide an appropriate framework and formulate policies to guide the development and management of tertiary education and deal with problems such as the poor articulation between secondary and tertiary education and the lack of synchronization between the academic year of tertiary institutions and the secondary school year. Plans are far advanced for the Council to be established as a statutory body.

The University of Botswana - the sole university in the country with an enrolment of about 8500 - admits around 20% of secondary school leavers annually on the basis of merit. This figure represents that which is within its means and capacity. Strategies to deal with the mounting pressure of social demand for admission to the institution in excess of 10.000 are currently being explored. A report shall be submitted to the Vice Chancellor by the end of October.

Through its Centre for Continuing Education and Department of Adult Education, the University has, in the last decade or so, taken the first steps towards the goal of providing technology-based lifelong learning through the distance and other modes. This dovetails with Government's decision to provide part-time studies and learning through the distance mode. We are now in the process of establishing a college of distance education in order to increase access to higher education.

To ensure the admission of candidates who qualify for tertiary level education regardless of economic status, Government has established a grant/loan scheme such that students of priority subjects- the sciences, applied sciences, engineering and technology, and science teaching - are awarded grants while those pursuing disciplines of lesser priority are awarded loans on a sliding scale. This scheme is making a significant and positive impact on the quantity and quality of students admitted to the Faculties of Science and Engineering and Technology in particular.

The University is actively working to ensure that the good quality students who gain access to the institution shall find themselves in a student-centred academic environment characterized by a commitment to the enhancement of academic quality, the building and consolidation of its research and development infrastructure and greater use and development of information technology in the teaching and learning process as well in management information systems. The building of partnerships current and prospective stakeholders - the private sector, the world of work, the rest of the educational system, government, civil society and the community at large - and the creation of international and regional collaborative teaching and research programmes are key items on the University's strategic agenda for change and sustained excellence.

Chairperson, members of my delegation shall be glad to share with colleagues in this conference our experiences in coming to terms with the policy issues and operational challenges with which we have grappled as we have worked towards building a higher education system consistent with our Vision 2016 - our national vision of Botswana 50 years after independence. In that way we hope contribute to laying the foundation for the of the three expected outcomes of this conference.

Lastly, Chairperson, Botswana commends UNESCO for giving priority attention to Africa through the Priority Africa Programme. I have no doubt that Africa shall continue to be assisted in the area of higher education in order to derive maximum benefit from this priority partnership with UNESCO.