

# **WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

## **Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century**

### **Vision and Action**

UNESCO, Paris, 5 – 9 October 1998

### **VOLUME V – PLENARY**

#### **Iran**

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.

Islamic Republic of Iran

---

**Speech of His Excellency Dr Mustafa Moin  
Minister of Culture and Higher Education of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

***In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate***

First of all allow me Mr. Chairperson to congratulate you on your election. I am sure that your long experience in this domain will guide us in our deliberations, and help us to arrive at a new and creative vision in the field of higher education.

Mr Chairperson,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the world's attention is engaged with issues such as culture-oriented development, dialogue between cultures and civilizations, spiritual values, religion and ethics, national identity, and safeguarding natural environment and human habitat. This creates new perspectives for higher education. Accordingly the very idea of higher education and the role of the university is susceptible to fundamental transformations.

Although the institution of university has its origin in religious schools and seminaries, in its present form it is a product and an instrument of the modern era. The traditional idea of the university can be traced to this historical origin. According to this idea, university is a centre for production, accumulation and dissemination of knowledge and, moreover, a focal point for teaching critical thinking and scientific outlook. It regards university not only as a place to be influenced by and receptive to social and technological changes but also a center that should itself be a fountainhead for change and stimulate transformations in various social norms and institutions.

It seems however, that with social and technological developments in recent decades, at least in some circles devoted to contemplating the issue of higher education, a more restricted understanding of the idea of university has developed which has replaced the old vision. From this point of view, university first and foremost is a place for training of a cadre of experts and specialists, rather than being a center for transmission of values and norms. This group of specialists and experts are essentially provided with an aggregate of scientific information and skills.

This change in perspective has no doubt wrought important effects in the social function of higher education. At the present time the ideal of higher education, more than transfer of a mass of knowledge to students during a certain period of life, constitutes life-long learning and the main thrust of the university system is to train well-rounded individuals capable of adjusting themselves to a rapidly changing and advancing technology. For this reason, there is a propensity now to define university subjects and disciplines in accordance with the needs of the work-world and technological exigencies rather than conventional classifications of science and the boundaries traditionally set between various branches of knowledge.

We believe this conference is a unique opportunity for decision-makers in developing countries to acquaint themselves with the latest accomplishments in the area of higher education. To keep abreast of the latest developments in this field and to share experiences and exchange viewpoints will be a great step towards making universities become more relevant and responsive to the needs and demands of their societies. In fact, lack of structural harmony between higher education and the demands arising from social and economic development is one of the main obstacles to comprehensive development.

The university system throughout the world plays a double role, which is more prominent in developing countries. On the one hand it should, in collaboration with other responsible institutions, define the aims and methods of development and on the other hand train the required human resources. This

will demand a close link and cooperation between universities and the planning and industrial sectors of society. With today's rapidly changing conditions, this link needs to be revised and redefined constantly.

Clearly, development can be achieved only through access to advanced science and technology. The developing countries can prevail upon underdevelopment only by reaching production level in the fields of advanced science and technology. The world of tomorrow belongs to those in possession of advanced science and technology, and what ensures access to advanced science and technology is the free flow of information, so that no one should have exclusive power in this domain.

In spite of the urgent need for social pertinence on the part of higher education, and its responsiveness to the demands and needs of the society, it is essential that universities also pay heed to their traditional responsibility of generating ideas and train those who will come up with creative solutions and guidelines for society at large.

In fact, the transformations occurring in recent decades which have led to a strengthening of the idea of functional university does not diminish the importance and necessity of university playing its original role by focusing on issues that traditionally have fallen under its purview. Moreover it makes this need increasingly significant and I hope the present conference will pay special attention to this role and mandate.

On the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are confronted with issues such as globalization, civil society, dialogue between civilizations and cultures and safeguard of individual and national freedoms versus hegemonies. These issues, which emerge from the particular condition of the world we live in need to be carefully elucidated. We need to evaluate these issues in a critical manner and consider not only their benefits and advantages but also their potential limitations.

The fulfillment of this crucial responsibility is not possible unless our universities and research centers, while trying to harmonize themselves ever so closely with the daily needs and exigencies of their societies, attempt to remain faithful to their original mission and mandate. This includes sensitivity to fundamental human problems and dedication to critical thinking and fostering theoretical research on these issues.

From our point of view, the concept of pertinence, which is one of the main themes of this conference, is closely related to this double mission of the university. Accordingly, the crucial task of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to sustain a close link with the society and at the same time enjoy the ability to stand back and examine the surrounding world in a sober and critical manner.

For a multitude of reasons, what I have said here about the mission of the university, has a special significance for the young and changing society of my country. The Islamic revolution in Iran considers cultural development as an inalienable part of the over all development of the society and deems the exclusion of spiritual components from the educational system as misguided and dangerous. The high status allotted to mankind in religious thought, especially in Islam, harmony between reason and revelation and between religion and science, and the necessity to reflect upon the created world, all demand a special attention to education and research.

Based on these values, our political system is devoted to the task of the mobilization of human resources of the country. Self-reliance and a determination to be present in the highest scientific levels have always been emphasized by the leadership of our revolution and the high-ranking authorities of our country.

As a developing country, with a very young population, Iran has been experiencing a remarkable growth in higher education during the past two decades. For instance, the index of the enrollment per 100.000 population has risen from 458 students in 1977 to 2000 in 1998, with the total student population of 1.2 million. The gender ratio of student population indicates a very profound transformation in Iranian society. Female students make up more than 52 percent of those admitted this year in non-private higher education institutions.

With such an extensive educational system, we give high priority to international scientific cooperation and information exchange.

We think that in higher education, policy making attempts should be made to prepare the theoretical grounds for "human right to development" as well as the appropriate mechanisms for its realization.

I believe it is necessary for me to elucidate that the development of higher education is a necessary prelude to sustainable development and serves as a comprehensive framework making social justice, mutual respect, democracy and human rights attainable and eventually facilitates the establishment of sustainable peace.

In his speech in the recent session of the United Nations General Assembly, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran made a proposal to the world community to declare the year 2001 as the year of dialogue between civilizations. I would like to use this opportunity to remark that universities can play a pivotal role in fashioning and formulating such a dialogue.

We think that such a dialogue would be a great step toward the idea of "Culture of Peace", which is the great ideal of UNESCO. Accordingly, The Islamic Republic of Iran, has considered the possibility of holding a conference, in cooperation with UNESCO, for the year 2001 on the role of the dialogue between civilizations in securing the global peace. I would like to thank the Director General for his interest and continued support for the dialogue between civilizations. I sincerely hope that UNESCO's capabilities will be a great help in this context.