



General Report

2009 World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE): The new dynamics of higher education and research for societal change and development

(UNESCO, Paris, 5-8 July 2009)

Excellencies,
Ministers,
Colleagues and friends in higher education,
Ladies and gentlemen,

A decade on from the 1998 World Conference, a decade that has seen many developments of deep significance for higher education, I feel honoured and privileged to be presenting this report to you and would like to thank the members of the Bureau, who have entrusted me with this task. I cannot do justice here to the wealth of ideas and proposals that have been a feature of the last three days. I shall try to capture the main ideas discussed and the spirit of those discussions.

I. Planning of the Conference and proceedings

Rather than adopting a linear approach, this presentation will offer an analysis of the issues from a general perspective and also of the political choices that have shaped the programme.

1. Participation by ministers and high-level decision-makers has been high, including participation in round tables and even the parallel sessions. This is evidence of two things: an awareness of the importance of higher education in building a knowledge society in the twenty-first century, and the trust placed in UNESCO to play its full part in this area.
2. Africa as a priority has been strongly highlighted, having been placed at the centre of today's debates and tomorrow's action, with reports on Africa for each round table and parallel session, and a General Rapporteur to summarize the proceedings. Africa is more than ever a priority for UNESCO and for international cooperation.
3. The reports of the regional conferences have revealed common ground and identical aims, which confirms the relevance of global reflection and joint action. At the same time, however, we have observed regional specificities that need to be taken into account if we are to avoid the kind of standardization that would involve an over-rigid response, that would, to use Bergson's terms, "superimpose the mechanical on the living".
4. All stakeholders were invited to express their views: panels of ministers, institutions, civil society and the private sector; contributions by international organizations such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); international donors, notably the World Bank and the African Development Bank, also made their position clear. Finally, though we would have liked to hear even more from them, the students themselves were given their say, their voices for the future mapping out the programme of their dreams and expectations.

An Internet forum had been opened three weeks prior to the Conference to gather the views and suggestions of those who wished to address the Conference.

5. Parallel sessions that were extremely rich in ideas addressed all aspects of higher education and research, attracting large audiences, whose size could be gauged from the chairs being moved and the extent of the applause that greeted the contributions.
6. There were numerous, entirely apposite documents to accompany the Conference, ranging from a philosophical reflection on knowledge in general and on the progress of our knowledge in particular right through to the technical aspects of the themes.
7. We must not forget the importance of the follow-up. The World Conference will only open the door to action, which lies "beyond the words".

II. Challenges emerging since the 1998 World Conference

We have witnessed a decade marked by change, with major implications for higher education. Certain trends that were only beginning to emerge in 1998 have since become established or gathered pace (an increased demand for training, information and communication technology, etc.). Other events have occurred, in particular the economic crisis, which pose more starkly than ever the question of the societal role of higher education and of how it should be financed.

1. Globalization has had a dramatic impact on higher education. As Mr Matsuura stated in his opening remarks, we no longer research, teach or communicate in the way that we used to.

For better or for worse, the mobility of people and ideas has speeded up, leading to the “brain drain” problem, which needs to be converted into a “brain circulation”.

The internationalization of our institutions is both a source of cooperation and a source of competition. We live in an interconnected and interdependent world.

2. The vertiginous speed with which technology is evolving offers new ways of accessing knowledge, along with the need to maintain the necessary critical distance in relation to how we use them.

However, the digital divide still exists, both across and within countries, causing inequalities that must be reduced as quickly as possible.

3. There has been an increase in the demand for education. This has resulted from the development of primary and secondary education, which can only be applauded.

A new population of adults on continuing education courses is now knocking on the doors of our institutions: lifelong education represents a new challenge for higher education.

Finally, a longer life expectancy is allowing many retired people to go to university in search of a better quality of life.

4. This increased demand raises the question of teaching staff and their training. Teachers in higher education are the heart of the system, which means paying particular attention to their status, to the attractiveness of the profession and to remuneration.

5. The economic situation and sustainable development present further challenges with the accompanying problems of graduate unemployment, the need to update knowledge and threats to the funding of higher education.

Sustainable development, a fresh cause for concern with regard to the future of humanity and the planet, leads us also to reflect on the responsibility of researchers and teachers in taking account of the problems and looking for solutions.

III. What kind of higher education for the twenty-first century?

I shall take as my starting point the Conference title itself: “The new dynamics”. This phrase implies movement and progress, and, as I see it, this progress will be the result of a dialectical interplay between demands that appear to contradict each other but are, in reality, complementary. It is in this binary form that I see higher education in the twenty-first century.

1. Teaching and research

Research is the source of innovation, of the creativity of new knowledge systems, both basic research and applied research in support of economic and social development. Teaching is the dissemination of knowledge, the preparation of young people for integration into the world of work, but it is also to communicate to the young and not-so-young a love of knowledge, “The Joy of Learning”, to quote the title of a work published a few years ago.

For a higher education system of quality, research and teaching are inseparable, their exact combination being dependent on the system as a whole, on the institutions, and on the career profile of the teacher-researcher.

2. Public good and private partnerships

Here I must emphasize the unquestionable role of the State in initiating and defining policies, in guaranteeing equality of opportunity in the interests of social cohesion and the quality of education and teachers.

At the same time, however, public resources cannot meet every need. We must therefore turn to private partnerships, but this must be done in complete transparency and with a due regard for quality, protecting our students from any misleading publicity.

3. Quantity and quality

It is vital that we cater for an increasingly large and diverse population, young people in pre-service education and adults engaged in lifelong learning, what Georges Haddad has called “a dynamic democratization of higher education”.

Access can, moreover, be widened by resorting to communication technology, especially distance education, which, as Sir John Daniel has shown, allows the different elements of the “iron triangle, access, quality and cost”, to be reconciled.

However, it is not enough to open doors, these students must be guided towards success, and not misled by being allowed to rush straight into subjects that lead nowhere; hence the need for a system that provides information, guidance on courses, personal tutoring and support. We have already heard about the system that has been set up in Africa to support girls who are opting for science courses.

Equity and quality

There can be no equity unless the education offered is of sufficient quality, and there can be no quality unless teaching and institutions are evaluated. But a word of caution, quality is not an absolute, it should be measured by its degree of appropriateness, in terms of set objectives and local conditions. International league tables take as sole indicators research, publications and citations, ignoring all the other missions of higher education (teaching, the integration of students, lifelong learning). It is necessary, therefore, to widen these assessment criteria in order to include every mission that a university undertakes.

Quality and diversity

Quality must not be understood as conforming to a norm, to a single model. Diversity must be preserved in all circumstances as a source of creativity and innovation.

4. Freedom and responsibility (accountability)

The preservation of academic freedom is more necessary than ever, the freedom to think, to research, to teach and to publish, all liberties that are indispensable to scientific progress.

At the same time, however, higher education is accountable

- to the Nation (use of public funds)
- to students (quality and relevance of the education offered)
- to society (higher education must be a factor in social progress and sustainable development, and must act as a watchdog in anticipating wherever possible extreme weather patterns or economic crises).

5. Internationalization and respect of diversity

International cooperation involves setting up networks that mutually benefit their members in terms of their strengthening and enriching effect. The UNESCO Chairs serve this purpose admirably.

International cooperation is a blessing, providing that we steer clear of the dangers, especially in cooperation between North and South, by promoting the establishment of poles of excellence in developing countries. The Pan-Africa Institute of Governance will serve as an example.

Regional cooperation must be fostered between countries in the same geographical region that have similar objectives and the same approach to problems in higher education. Thus, reference has been made to the European Higher Education and Research Area and the African Area, with an Arab Area now under study, making it easier for students and academics to move between countries and enabling qualifications to be recognized internationally, as enshrined in the Bologna Process. But this process is just one example, there are others; we must be particularly careful not to import models that are incompatible with local conditions. Lastly, international cooperation should only happen if it respects cultural diversity and its corollary, linguistic diversity.

6. Educating for citizenship and for world citizenship

The Bucharest Conference and several delegations stressed the importance of values. Higher education teaches young people values such as justice, respect, solidarity, rights and their accompanying duties, in short it teaches them democracy. This sometimes gives rise in institutions to social activities, mutual support and voluntary work. In this respect, higher education is a tool for constructing national identity.

But we must also, with the help of mobility, make our young people citizens of the world. Montaigne said a long time ago that we should travel and “rub and polish our brains against other people’s brains”. In eighteenth-century Europe, the Grand Tour allowed young people of means to travel the world so as to become familiar with the manners and institutions of the countries they visited. Today, the ERASMUS and ERASMUS-MUNDUS programmes offer the same advantage to a wider public. Travel “opens windows” on the world, allows us to meet other people, to respect them in their difference. UNESCO reminds us that the foundations for peace are built first of all within the minds of men and women by means of education.

IV. Some few recommendations. Messages from the 2009 Conference

From the foregoing remarks I will extract six recommendations, two for the political decision-makers, two for higher education institutions and two for UNESCO.

Messages for the political decision-makers

- Protect higher education as a major investment in the future, as a public asset, even if the private sector can make its own contribution to the funding and diversification of institutions. And above all, do not let up on this effort, even in times of economic crisis.
- Give solidarity its full meaning, by developing international cooperation, by seeking and finding original methods of funding (a tax on airline or other tickets) to enable developing countries, too, to equip themselves with a higher education system of quality.

Messages for institutions of higher education

- Fully define your strategy and your aims in terms of your specificity and the nature of your in-take; once you have done this, aim for excellence in your specialist field(s).
- Bring out the best in your staff (training, status, image, salary), for they are the cornerstone of the system. Above all, never think that technology and distance education can completely replace the teacher: nothing can rival personal contact between student and teacher.

Messages for UNESCO

- Acknowledge the role of higher education at the heart of the education system, give it its due place in your programmes and your budget for education for all.
- Play your role to the full
 - the normative role of defining the rules of good practice that will serve as benchmarks;
 - the role of helping countries that wish to develop their higher education;
 - the role of monitoring, of collecting and disseminating information, especially using statistics as a tool of transparency.

In conclusion

The World Conference has come to a close after four days of exciting and fruitful debate. It is now up to us to make good use of the ideas that have come out of it, the examples of good practice and the commitments that have been given.

The present Rapporteur would like to congratulate UNESCO, the Education Sector, the Division of Higher Education, its Director, Georges Haddad, and his entire team, who have

succeeded in organizing a conference that has been as impressive in terms of quality as it has been in terms of scale. I am certain that its success has lived up to their expectations and their efforts.

Thanks, also, to everyone who has contributed to the debates so expertly and with such conviction.

Thanks to Jean-Pierre, Guy, Estelle and Emily, who have helped me to assemble the information needed to present this report to you.

And finally, thanks to all of you for your attention.

Suzy Halimi