

The New Dynamics of Higher Education:
Meeting the Challenges of Equity, Quality and Social Responsibility

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Thank you for this invitation. Let me start by wishing OECD/CERI an excellent 40th anniversary. Your Centre makes a stimulating intellectual contribution to thinking about the future of education and the forces shaping it. I have personally taken a vivid interest in its work on the impact of brain research on learning, on the New Millennium Learners initiative, and now of course on higher education.

We are celebrating another anniversary this week - the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It establishes that “everyone has the right to education” but also that “higher education shall be accessible to all, on the basis of merit.’ In any discussion about education, it is worth recalling this rights foundation because such declarations and conventions represent binding commitments for governments.

Today we turn our attention to the future of higher education. Our agendas coincide as UNESCO’s World Conference on Higher Education will take place here in Paris next July. To bring a global perspective to our meeting today, I would like to share with you some reflections from Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Asia Pacific regions, drawing on regional conferences leading up to next July’s global event. Other regional conferences are planned in the Arab States and Europe. But I would also like to set higher education within a broader context and speak about the challenge of building more inclusive, innovative and flexible education systems that serve both individual and social aspirations.

Access, equity and quality are challenges facing all levels of the education system. The starting premise is that education must first and foremost serve all because it is a human right and a development imperative. A majority of the world’s governments have committed to achieving education for all by 2015. Last month at the International Education Conference in Geneva, education ministers from 153 member states once again reiterated the importance of building inclusive

education systems that address the diverse needs of all learners at all levels.

This matters because no level of education can be considered in isolation. Higher education is increasingly strategic – for national and regional development, for finding solution to some of today’s leading social, economic, health and environmental challenges and also, for achieving education for all.

Our conference next July is built around what we are calling the “New Dynamics of Higher Education.” These new dynamics are profoundly transforming the landscape of higher education. Let me draw attention to six of them: demand, diversification, networking, lifelong learning, ICTs and social responsibility.

First the dynamic of rising demand. Worldwide there has been an almost 50 percent increase in enrolment at the tertiary level since the turn of the century. In the Asia Pacific region, home to 60 percent of the world’s population, enrolments have risen from about 22 million students in 1999 to 44 million in 2006; in Latin America and the Caribbean, from 10 million to over 16 million. But despite this unprecedented expansion, tertiary enrolments remain low: a mere 5 percent in Africa, 11 percent in South and West Asia, 22 percent in the Arab States, and 25 percent in East Asia/Pacific. It is now commonplace to say that participation rates of 40 to 50 percent in higher education are considered vital to economic growth. As you can see, we are far from this in some of the most populated regions and all forecasts suggest that demand will continue to grow.

Clearly not all countries and within countries, not all social groups, are benefiting from this expansion. As participants at our regional conferences asked, how can higher education become more accessible to ethnic and linguistic minorities, to indigenous groups, to those living in marginalized regions? Migration trends, combined with increasing student mobility – expected to triple by 2025 – will further accentuate the diversity of student populations, calling for policies that promote access to learning and academic programmes and staff that respect cultural and linguistic diversity. So addressing demand with a concern for equity and inclusion is a first challenge.

These inequalities and disparities mirror and indeed reflect those at other levels of the education system. A child in sub-Saharan Africa has less of a chance of reaching the end of primary school than a European has of

entering university. Worldwide, 75 million children of primary school age are out of school. One in six adults – 776 million – still lack basic literacy skills. Such inequalities are a source of deep social and economic polarization. We cannot build prosperous societies on such unequal foundations. Participants at our Latin America and Caribbean regional conference in Cartagena also highlighted this, noting that well-established university systems such as those in Brazil and Mexico exist alongside high degrees of illiteracy. More equitable, inclusive systems promote social cohesion through learning opportunities at all levels, in formal *and* non-formal settings.

Diversification is the second dynamic at work. It has been spawned by rising demand, globalization and new information technologies. More complex, competitive systems are emerging, with a variety of institutions, providers and differentiated approaches. Cross-border provision is expanding rapidly. In this context, quality assurance is essential to protect students from fraudulent and low quality providers, many of which offer costly online courses. This is an area for global collaboration. UNESCO has facilitated the establishment of six regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications that have been ratified by over 100 member states. Along with OECD we have developed guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education. We have also set up an information portal on higher education institutions to help students make informed decisions and to protect them from misleading information. For now the portal, still in a pilot phase, covers some 20 countries.

A third dynamic is institutional cooperation and networking in research, knowledge creation and sharing. All our regional conferences have underlined the importance of regional spaces for higher education inspired by the Bologna model. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Enlaces aims to promote regional integration. The Asia Pacific region has created many forms of institutional cooperation, alliances and research networks, some engaged in socially oriented missions. The African Union has recently taken steps to create such a space for sharing experience and expertise. These spaces have the potential to strengthen a region's knowledge base and improve regional mobility and communication among students, scholars and researchers. It is important to promote them.

A fourth dynamic is the reality of lifelong learning. Our knowledge-intensive societies call for opportunities to upgrade skills and learn new ones. Higher education systems are being challenged to become more flexible in terms of entry and exit, to recognize qualifications gained

through work experience and to develop new programmes adapted to changing social and economic needs. This involves partnerships to forge closer links with the world of work and help to bridge the mismatch between supply and demand for higher-level skills. We see this in countries and regions such as Africa simultaneously characterized by low rates of higher education enrolment but also high rates of graduate unemployment.

A fifth dynamic at work relates to the impact of information and communication technology on all aspects of learning – distance learning, e-learning, and the growth of open universities that are making higher education more accessible, especially for working adults. I would like to draw attention to one example of how technology can facilitate access to knowledge: the open educational resources community, through which some 3,000 courses are now freely available in digital format.

Finally, the dynamic of social responsibility, a specific theme of our next world conference. Higher education plays a strategic role in training teachers and planners, in conducting pedagogical research and developing curricula. More broadly, universities play an influential role in equipping graduates with the knowledge, skills and concern to address a range of social, economic and scientific issues. It is interesting to note that the United Nations is seeking to better connect with higher education institutions through its new Academic Impact programme. One of its aims is to promote their engagement in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Governments today face tough policy choices. They are under enormous pressure in developing regions to expand all levels of the education system. The financial crisis and economic slowdown runs the risk of putting even more pressure on education systems, through stagnation or cutbacks in national spending and through lower levels of aid. It is more important than ever to repeat the salience of education for human development and prosperity. At the higher level, more innovative financing mechanisms will undoubtedly be required to broaden the funding base.

The bottom line is that political commitment to education and global collaboration will be required to build more inclusive, flexible and high quality education systems at all levels.

At UNESCO we look forward to continued and strengthened collaboration with OECD on many of these new dynamics. I trust that we can reflect the outcomes your meeting today at our World Conference

next July. Our aim is for the global community to agree on *concrete* actions to ensure that higher education plays a strategic role in knowledge creation and sharing for a more sustainable future.

Thank you very much.