



**2009 World Conference on Higher Education:
The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research
for Societal Change and Development**

(UNESCO, Paris, 5 – 8 July 2009)

OUTLINE

Background

WCHE

The 1998 World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE) constituted a key moment for the higher education community. When convening the WCHE, UNESCO sought the commitment of Member States and all other stakeholders to ensure that the future orientations of this sector would be based on equity of advanced educational opportunity for all citizens, modernized systems and institutions, and enhanced social relevance and links to the world of work. The Conference fully demonstrated the importance of higher education as a key factor for cultural, social, economic and political development, as an endogenous capacity-builder, as a promoter of human rights, sustainable development, democracy, peace and justice. UNESCO, acting in close cooperation with its Member States and with a broad range of partners, notably the intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, and other specialized United Nations agencies, has set in place a strategy for the implementation of the orientations established by the World Conference at the national, regional and international levels. Many initiatives have been taken in order to follow up the reflection on higher education and to take concrete action in line with the decisions of the WCHE.

WCHE+5

Five years after the WCHE, the Meeting of Higher Education Partners (WCHE+5) identified a number of major developments and trends at the global level which have a direct bearing on higher education and set its direction and pace of change: globalization; knowledge as the driving force of development; ICTs and their role in the emerging knowledge societies; the evolving relationship between higher education, the State, the market and the community as a whole; constant social and political change, marked both by progress made in securing democratic, human rights-based governance, more equitable societies and by the continued persistence of glaring inequalities, poverty, insecurity and instability; and shifts in world demographic trends.

Towards a WCHE 2009

A resolution was adopted at the 34th Session of UNESCO's General Conference (October 2007), requesting the Director-General to convene a World Conference on Higher Education in 2009 to take stock of developments since 1998 and to support the organization of regional events preceding the 2009 WCHE that could constitute the basis for the global debates.

A Conference Committee was set up for the preparation of the 2009 WCHE. Comprised of the Bureau of the International WCHE Follow-up Committee and several higher education experts, the Conference Committee provided valuable input regarding the conceptual design of the 2009 WCHE, including the expected outcomes of this event, and assisted the Secretariat during the preparation of the Conference.

The UNESCO/ADEA Task Force for the 2009 WCHE, set up in June 2008, acted as the Steering Committee for the preparation of the round table on African higher education at the Conference.

Conference objectives and documents

The 2009 WCHE will provide a global platform for forward-looking thinking and debate on the rapidly changing higher education and research spaces. The conference will take stock of

changes in higher education since the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education, and will address the new dynamics that are likely to shape the strategic agenda for the development of higher education policies and institutions in the foreseeable future. It will reaffirm the importance of higher education and research in meeting global challenges, as well as in building more inclusive, equitable and sustainable knowledge societies.

A series of documents have been prepared to inform the debates of the 2009 WCHE. These include the report on global trends in higher education 1998-2008, the regional reports on the status of higher education and agendas for future development, a report on research systems.

Preparatory regional conferences

Regional events were organized since June 2008 by UNESCO offices, centres or institutes to bring specific regional concerns, expectations and proposals to the 2009 WCHE thus enriching the debates at the World Conference: Latin America and the Caribbean (Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, 4-6 June 2008); Asia and Pacific (Macao, SAR China, 25-26 September 2008; and New Delhi, India, 25-26 February 2009); Africa (Dakar, Senegal, 10-13 November 2008); Europe (Bucharest, Romania, 21-24 May 2009), and the Arab Region (Cairo, Egypt, 31 May – 2 June 2009). The outcomes of these regional consultations are available online at <http://www.unesco.org/en/wche2009/regional-conferences/>.

Themes

The higher education policy agenda had considerably evolved since 1998 and the sector is more than ever a priority for tomorrow. Higher education faces many challenges – recurrent and more recent ones – whose in-depth understanding would help to shape action at the global, regional, national and institutional level. This will contribute to ensuring that the sector fulfils its mission to educate highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens, to create and to disseminate knowledge so that it informs policy-making, and to provide services to the community.

The WCHE 2009 addresses the new dynamics of higher education and research and in particular with the shaping of strategies for societal change and development. It should be seen as a new development in the wake of the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education, which served as a historic landmark in defining the core dimensions of higher education in society at the outset of the 21st century. Many of the questions raised at that time, in particular those concerning the functions of higher education and its main underlying principles, remain largely valid and need not to be recast a decade later.

Hence, the WCHE 2009 focuses on selected themes in order to identify directions for change and improvement useful for decision makers at system and institutional level.

The basic structure of the Conference reflects these orientations. The Conference has two overarching themes for debates in plenary sessions: higher education's role in addressing major global challenges (sustainable development, Education for All, poverty eradication); and the societal commitment to higher education and social responsibility of higher education. The Conference also has a special focus in plenary on the revitalization of higher education in Africa.

Three broad sub-themes will be addressed in parallel sessions: Internationalization, regionalization and globalization; Equity, access and quality; Learning, research and innovation. Each of these themes will be looked at from different angles, in particular: public and private roles and responsibilities; the emergence of new models and approaches; the possibilities offered by ICTs and open and distance learning (ODL), including open educational resources

(OERs); the implications in terms of funding and investment; the implications in terms of governance and management.

Round Table - *The Social Responsibility of Higher Education: Addressing the Challenges of our Times*

The recent economic crisis has highlighted societal commitment to education, underscored by the decision of some of the leading economic powers to spend massively on education as a sound investment for economic recovery and growth. But it has also highlighted the fact that society has endowed its educational institutions with greater social responsibilities than ever before, and the expectations are high: we now look to education not just to educate our children and youth, but to bring us out of poverty and set us on the path to peace and sustainable development. Can institutions of higher education carry through on their growing responsibilities in the domain of socio-economic development? What is the reasonable extent of higher education's social responsibilities, and how can we ensure that all countries, both in the North and South, are able to fulfill them? Will fulfilling these responsibilities require a radical re-shaping of the dominant higher educational system and philosophy? How can new and emerging dynamics in higher education be recognized and conceptualized, and how can they help to address the challenges of our times?

This round table will seek to investigate and develop the idea of the social responsibility of higher education, particularly in light of development imperatives such as sustainable development, peace, and the Millennium Development Goals, and against the backdrop of the financial crisis.

Round Table Africa - *Promoting Excellence to Accelerate Africa's Development: Towards an African Higher Education and Research Area*

The recently held Regional Conference on Higher Education in Africa (CRESA) (10-13 November 2008) reaffirmed the commitment of regional key stakeholders in higher education to contribute to the revitalization of higher education in Africa, premised on the expansion and broadening of access to high quality education that responds to the needs of African countries. The conference identified four key areas that will enhance the rapid transformation of African societies in a globalized world: relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of higher education; research and innovation; creation of an African higher education area; and quality assurance.

Building on CRESA recommendations, including those highlighted by African Ministers of Education of Higher Education in their Communiqué, on recent work done on higher education in Africa, and keeping in mind the broader vision for education on the continent as articulated in the African Union Plan for the Second Decade of Education in Africa that was adopted by the Heads of States of member countries of the African Union, this round table proposes to briefly recall and document key areas for the development and revitalization of African higher education, and to suggest actions required to turn the vision of sustainable quality higher education in Africa into reality.

Thematic track I: *Internationalization, regionalization and globalization*

The diverse and distinct developments of internationalization, regionalization and globalization are now key factors shaping higher education and research strategies at system and institutional level. These strategies include both cooperation and competition.

The development of regional education/research areas in various parts of the world calls for new regional instruments (e.g. for quality assurance and recognition) and challenges national values and cultures. As part of these developments, the special challenges facing small states, whether island or landlocked, is another impact of globalization requiring special attention.

The workshop sessions will address issues ranging from the changing pattern of relations between state, higher education and the market; the variety of innovative international initiatives and partnerships; the potential offered by cross-border delivery of education and educational resources and the related risks; the implications of these new trends on funding models for higher education institutions and for learners - well beyond mobility grants; and the deep-reaching changes required in HE policies as well as in the governance and management patterns.

Thematic track II: ***Equity, access, quality***

Equity refers not only to the openness of higher education in terms of access, which has been the main focus of attention hitherto, but also in terms of success, which emphasizes the key responsibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) in leading their students (those they have, not those they would like to have) to graduation and integration into society. Higher access rates remain unproductive if they are combined with high dropout/failure rates.

This calls for more effective teaching/learning processes geared towards social relevance - which requires in many cases profound curricular and methodological renovation - and for adequate quality assurance (QA) mechanisms. QA systems should encourage improved learning processes adapted to various categories of learners and encompass not only traditional HE programmes, but also borderless, private and continuing education.

These workshops will address: the diversity of societal demands and of educational answers - including the role and growth of private higher education - and the links between differentiation of HE and higher access/success rates; the implications of the new models of student-centered learning and lifelong learning in view of the diverse goals of HE programmes and of HE learners, in terms of access and learning strategies; the implications of new and more diverse modes of delivery based on ICTs, including e-learning, open educational resources and mobile technologies; the need to invest into change in these directions rather than in the sheer maintenance of the existing status quo in educational systems; and the need for enabling regulatory frameworks for higher education, coupled with autonomy and accountability and in tune with the overall system of education/training and research/innovation – including aspects related to the planning, implementation and rewarding of change.

Thematic track III: ***Learning, Research, Innovation***

The linkage between learning, research and innovation within higher education systems is key to their sustainability and their ability to serve societal needs in the knowledge society and economy in the context of globalization.

The issue is about the need for HEIs with different degrees of research-intensiveness and different types of research – including the question of the most adequate level of concentration of human and financial resources for the emergence of poles of particular high quality or “excellence” and that of the relevance of research/innovation to the concrete needs of countries and regions.

The issue is also about the “elite universities” and the importance of the existence of different

types and levels of HEIs (polytechnics, colleges, short professional higher education) and of pathways allowing learners to choose an itinerary that best suits them.

The workshop sessions will address the tension between open access and processes aimed at allowing and encouraging the emergence of itineraries and poles of superior quality throughout the whole education and research system; the cooperative models (e.g. through OERs) and initiatives that could allow certain HEIs and countries to catch up with the more advanced ones; the need for funding mechanisms for the emergence of “excellence” that do not weaken the broad educational basis on which it hinges; and the new governance and management patterns required for the development of knowledge-intensive groups, institutions and systems.

Participants

The 2009 World Conference will bring together over 1,200 participants representing a broad range of actors with a vested interest in higher education:

- Ministers of education/higher education or other high-level national policy-makers responsible for higher education
- Representatives of national commissions for UNESCO
- Representatives of permanent delegations to UNESCO
- Presidents and representatives of national rectors’ associations
- Presidents and representatives of national university associations
- Institutional leaders, the professoriate, researchers and students
- Intergovernmental organizations, non governmental organizations in the field of higher education and research
- Quality assurance experts and bodies
- Representatives of the economic and professional sectors
- UN agencies
- Selected UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN networks

Conference expected outcomes

It is expected that as a result of the WCHE debates, a new commitment to the development of higher education and research systems able to better respond to changing labour market needs and to the growing and multiple demands of society will emerge. This will ensure more concerted and effective cooperation to meet the challenges of sustainable human development where the enhanced creation and sharing of knowledge and know-how are essential factors. The outcomes of the WCHE debates will inform policy making at system and institutional levels and facilitate the identification of concrete actions aimed at ensuring that the higher education sector meets both national development objectives and individual aspirations. The conference will also pay special attention to the African higher education and will propose an action plan to support its revitalization in cooperation with African and other partners. The possible launch of a series of world reports on global in trends in higher education would support national and institutional efforts in higher education.