

HIGHER EDUCATION IN 21ST CENTURY: VISION & STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has given ample proof of its viability over the centuries and of its ability to change and to induce change and progress in society. Owing to the scope and pace of change, society has become increasingly knowledge-based so that higher learning and research now act as essential components of cultural, socio-economic and environmentally sustainable development of individuals, communities and nations.

Education is a fundamental pillar of human rights, democracy, sustainable development, peace, and shall therefore become accessible to all throughout life and that, measures are required to ensure co-ordination and co-operation across and between the various sectors, particularly between general, technical and professional education as well as between universities, colleges and technical institutions. In this context, the solution of the problems faced in the twenty-first century will be determined by the vision of the future society and by the role that is assigned to higher education. In other words, it is the duty of higher education to ensure that the values and ideals of a culture of peace prevail and that the intellectual community should be mobilized to that end.

INTRODUCTION:

There is an unprecedented demand for and a great diversification in higher education, as well as an increased awareness of its vital importance for socio-cultural and economic development, and for building the future, for which the younger generations will need to be equipped with new skills, knowledge and ideals. Everywhere higher education is faced with great challenges and difficulties related to financing, equity of conditions at access into and during the course of studies, improved staff development, skills-based training, enhancement and preservation of quality in teaching, research and services, relevance of programmes, employability of graduates, establishment of efficient co-operation agreements and equitable access to the benefits of international co-operation. At

the same time, higher education is being challenged by new opportunities relating to technologies that are improving the ways in which knowledge can be produced, managed, disseminated, accessed and controlled. Equitable access to these technologies should be ensured at all levels of education systems.

It has become increasingly important for higher education institutions to specify priorities and initiatives, vision, some amount of risk and commitment to built solid foundations for the future. Thus, this paper highlights the challenges of higher education as well as identifies various strategies for the development.

A substantial change and development of higher education, the enhancement of its quality and relevance, and the solution to the major challenges it faces, require the strong involvement not only of governments and of higher education institutions, but also of all stakeholders, including students and their families, teachers, business and industry, the public and private sectors of the economy, parliaments, the media, the community, professional associations and society as well as a greater responsibility of higher education institutions towards society and accountability in the use of public and private, national or international resources. For this, higher education systems should enhance their capacity to live with uncertainty, to change and bring about change, and to address social needs and to promote solidarity and equity; should preserve and exercise scientific rigour and originality, in a spirit of impartiality, as a basic prerequisite for attaining and sustaining an indispensable level of quality; and should place students at the centre of their concerns, within a lifelong perspective, so as to allow their full integration into the global knowledge society of the coming century.

MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION:

The core mission of higher education is to contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of society as a whole, should be preserved, reinforced and further expanded, namely, to:

- Educate highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity, by offering relevant qualifications, including professional training, which combine high-level knowledge and skills, using courses and content continually tailored to the present and

future needs of society;

- Provide opportunities for higher learning and for learning throughout life, giving to learners an optimal range of choice and a flexibility of entry and exit points within the system, as well as an opportunity for individual development and social mobility in order to educate for citizenship and for active participation in society, with a worldwide vision, for endogenous capacity-building, and for the consolidation of human rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace, in a context of justice;
- Advance, create and disseminate knowledge through research and provide, as part of its service to the community, relevant expertise to assist societies in cultural, social and economic development, promoting and developing scientific and technological research as well as research in the social sciences, the humanities and the creative arts;
- Help understand, interpret, preserve, enhance, promote and disseminate national and regional, international and historic cultures, in a context of cultural pluralism and diversity;
- Help protect and enhance societal values by training young people in the values which form the basis of democratic citizenship and by providing critical and detached perspectives to assist in the discussion of strategic options and the reinforcement of humanistic perspectives;
- Contribute to the development and improvement of education at all levels, including through the training of teachers.
- Play a role in helping identify and address issues that affect the well-being of communities, nations and global society.

Vision of Higher Education:

- As per Article 26.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, admission to higher education should be based on the merit, capacity, efforts, perseverance and devotion, showed by those seeking access to it, and can take place in a lifelong scheme, at any time, with due recognition of previously acquired skills. As a consequence, no discrimination can be accepted in granting access to higher education on grounds of race, gender,

language or religion, or economic, cultural or social distinctions, or physical disabilities.

- Equity of access to higher education should begin with the reinforcement and, if need be, the reordering of its links with all other levels of education, particularly with secondary education. Higher education institutions must work in active partnership with parents, schools, students, socio-economic groups and communities. Secondary education should not only prepare qualified candidates for access to higher education by developing the capacity to learn on a broad basis but also open the way to active life by providing training on a wide range of jobs. However, access to higher education should remain open to those successfully completing secondary school, or its equivalent, or presenting entry qualifications, as far as possible, at any age and without any discrimination.
- As a consequence, the rapid and wide-reaching demand for higher education requires, where appropriate, all policies concerning access to higher education to give priority in the future to the approach based on the merit of the individual, as defined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Access to higher education for members of some special target groups, such as indigenous peoples, cultural and linguistic minorities, disadvantaged groups, and those who suffer from disabilities, must be actively facilitated, since these groups as collectivities and as individuals may have both experience and talent that can be of great value for the development of societies and nations. Special material help and educational solutions can help overcome the obstacles that these groups face, both in accessing and in continuing higher education.

Elements of Higher Education: Research:

The advancement of knowledge through research is an essential function of all systems of higher education, which should promote postgraduate studies. Innovation, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary should be promoted and reinforced in programmes with long-term orientations on social and cultural aims

and needs. An appropriate balance should be established between basic and target-oriented research.

Institutions should ensure that all members of the academic community engaged in research are provided with appropriate training, resources and support. The intellectual and cultural rights on the results of research should be used to the benefit of humanity and should be protected so that they cannot be abused.

Research must be enhanced in all disciplines, including the social and human sciences, engineering, natural sciences, mathematics, informatics and the arts within the framework of national, regional and international research and development policies. Of special importance is the enhancement of research capacities in higher education research institutions, as mutual enhancement of quality takes place when higher education and research are conducted at a high level within the same institution. These institutions should find the material and financial support required, from both public and private sources.

Relevance:

Relevance in higher education should be assessed in terms of the fit between what society expects of institutions and what they do. This requires ethical standards, political impartiality, critical capacities and, at the same time, a better articulation with the problems of society and the world of work, basing long-term orientations on societal aims and needs, including respect for cultures and environmental protection. The concern is to provide access to both broad general education and targeted, career-specific education, often interdisciplinary, focusing on skills and aptitudes, both of which equip individuals to live in a variety of changing settings, and to be able to change occupations.

Higher education should reinforce its role of service to society, especially its activities aimed at eliminating poverty, intolerance, violence, illiteracy, hunger, environmental degradation and disease, mainly through an interdisciplinary approach in the analysis of problems and issues.

Higher education should enhance its contribution to the development of the whole education system, notably through improved teacher education, curriculum development and educational research. Ultimately, higher education should aim at

the creation of a new society - non-violent and non-exploitative -consisting of highly cultivated, motivated and integrated individuals, inspired by love for humanity and guided by wisdom.

Strengthening co-operation and anticipating societal needs:

In economies characterized by changes and the emergence of new production paradigms based on knowledge and its application, and on the handling of information, the links between higher education, the world of work and otherparts of society should be strengthened and renewed.

Links with the world of work can be strengthened, through the participation of its representatives in the governance of institutions, the increased use of domestic and international apprenticeship/work-study opportunities for students and teachers, the exchange of personnel between the world of work and higher education institutions and revised curricula more closely aligned with working practices. As a lifelong source of professional training, updating and recycling, institutions of higher education should systematically take into account trends in the world of work and in the scientific, technological and economic sectors. In order to respond to the work requirements, higher education systems and the world of work should jointly develop and assess learning processes, bridging programmes and prior learning assessment and recognition programmes, which integrate theory and training on the job. Within the framework of their anticipatory function, higher education institutions could contribute to the creation of new jobs, although that is not their only function.

Developing entrepreneurial skills and initiative should become maj or concerns of higher education, in order to facilitate employability of graduates who will increasingly be called upon to be not only job seekers but also and above all to become job creators. Higher education institutions should give the opportunity to students to fully develop their own abilities with a sense of social responsibility, educating them to become full participants in democratic society and promoters of changes that will foster equity and justice. Therefore, institutions should be able to offer a wide variety of education and training opportunities: traditional degrees, short courses, part-time study, flexible schedules, modularized courses, supported

learning at a distance, etc.

Critical thinking and creativity:

In a world undergoing rapid changes, there is a perceived need for a new vision and paradigm of higher education, which should be student-oriented, calling in most countries for in-depth reforms and an open access policy so as to cater for ever more diversified categories of people, and of its contents, methods, practices and means of delivery, based on new types of links and partnerships with the community and with the broadest sectors of society.

Higher education institutions should educate students to become well informed and deeply motivated citizens, who can think critically, analyze problems of society, look for solutions to the problems of society, apply them and accept social responsibilities.

To achieve these goals, it may be necessary to recast curricula, using new and appropriate methods, so as to go beyond cognitive mastery of disciplines. New pedagogical and didactical approaches should be accessible and promoted in order to facilitate the acquisition of skills, competences and abilities for communication, creative and critical analysis, independent thinking and team work in multicultural contexts, where creativity also involves combining traditional or local knowledge and know-how with advanced science and technology. These recast curricula should take into account the gender dimension and the specific cultural, historic and economic context of each country. The teaching of human rights standards and education on the needs of communities in all parts of the world should be reflected in the curricula of all disciplines, particularly those preparing for entrepreneurship. Academic personnel should play a significant role in determining the curriculum.

New methods of education will also imply new types of teaching-learning materials. These have to be coupled with new methods of testing that will promote not only powers of memory but also powers of comprehension, skills for practical work and creativity.

Policy of staff development:

A vigorous policy of staff development is an essential element for higher education institutions. Clear policies should be established concerning higher

education teachers, who nowadays need to focus on teaching students how to learn and how to take initiatives. Adequate provision should be made for research and for updating and improving pedagogical skills, through appropriate staff development programmes, encouraging constant innovation in curriculum, teaching and learning methods, and ensuring appropriate professional and financial status, and for excellence in research and teaching, reflecting the corresponding provisions of the Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel approved by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1997. In view of the role of higher education for lifelong learning, experience outside the institutions ought to be considered as a relevant qualification for higher educational staff.

Clear policies should be established by all higher education institutions preparing teachers for constant innovation in curriculum, best practices in teaching methods and familiarity with diverse learning styles. It is vital to have appropriately trained administrative and technical personnel.

National and institutional decision-makers should place students and their needs at the centre of their concerns, and should consider them as major partners and responsible stakeholders in the renewal of higher education. This should include student involvement in issues that affect that level of education, in evaluation, the renovation of teaching methods and curricula and, in the institutional framework in force, in policy-formulation and institutional management.

Guidance and counselling services should be developed, in co-operation with student organizations, in order to assist students in the transition to higher education at whatever age and to take account of the needs of ever more diversified categories of learners. Apart from those entering higher education from schools or further education colleges, they should also take account of the needs of those leaving and returning in a lifelong process. Such support is important in ensuring a good match between student and course, reducing drop-out. Students who do drop out should have suitable opportunities to return to higher education if and when appropriate.

Strategies / Policies:**Qualitative evaluation**

Quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions, and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment. Internal self-evaluation and external review, conducted openly by independent specialists, if possible with international expertise, are vital for enhancing quality. Independent national bodies should be established and comparative standards of quality, recognized at international level, should be defined. Due attention should be paid to specific institutional, national and regional contexts in order to take into account diversity and to avoid uniformity. Stakeholders should be an integral part of the institutional evaluation process.

Quality also requires that higher education should be characterized by its international dimension: exchange of knowledge, interactive networking, mobility of teachers and students, and international research projects, while taking into account the national cultural values and circumstances.

To attain and sustain national, regional or international quality, certain components are particularly relevant, notably careful selection of staff and continuous staff development, in particular through the promotion of appropriate programmes for academic staff development, including teaching/learning methodology and mobility between countries, between higher education institutions, and between higher education institutions and the world of work, as well as student mobility within and between countries. The new information technologies are an important tool in this process, owing to their impact on the acquisition of knowledge and know-how.

Use of ICT

The information and communication technologies will further change the way knowledge is developed, acquired and delivered. It is also important to note that the new technologies offer opportunities to innovate on course content and teaching methods and to widen access to higher learning. However, it should be

borne in mind that new information technology does not reduce the need for teachers but changes their role in relation to the learning process and that the continuous dialogue that converts information into knowledge and understanding becomes fundamental. Higher education institutions should lead in drawing on the advantages and potential of new information and communication technologies, ensuring quality and maintaining high standards for education practices and outcomes in a spirit of openness, equity and international co-operation by:

- Engaging in networks, technology transfer, capacity-building, developing teaching materials and sharing experience of their application in teaching, training and research, making knowledge accessible to all;
- Creating new learning environments, ranging from distance education facilities to complete virtual higher education institutions and systems, capable of bridging distances and developing high-quality systems of education, thus serving social and economic advancement and democratization as well as other relevant priorities of society, while ensuring that these virtual education facilities, based on regional, continental or global networks, function in a way that respects cultural and social identities;
- Noting that, in making full use of information and communication technology (ict) for educational purposes, particular attention should be paid to removing the grave inequalities which exist among and also within the countries of the world with regard to access to new information and communication technologies and to the production of the corresponding resources;
- Adapting ict to national, regional and local needs and securing technical, educational, management and institutional systems to sustain it;
- Facilitating, through international co-operation, the identification of the objectives and interests of all countries, particularly the developing countries, equitable access and the strengthening of infrastructures in this field and the dissemination of such technology throughout society;
- Closely following the evolution of the 'knowledge society' in order to ensure high quality and equitable regulations for access to prevail;

- Taking the new possibilities created by the use of icts into account, while realizing that it is, above all, institutions of higher education that are using icts in order to modernize their work, and not icts transforming institutions of higher education from real to virtual institutions.

Strengthening management and financing

The management and financing of higher education require the development of appropriate planning and policy-analysis capacities and strategies, based on partnerships established between higher education institutions and state and national planning and co-ordination bodies, so as to secure appropriately streamlined management and the cost-effective use of resources. Higher education institutions should adopt forward-looking management practices that respond to the needs of their environments. Managers in higher education must be responsive, competent and able to evaluate regularly, by internal and external mechanisms, the effectiveness of procedures and administrative rules.

Higher education institutions must be given autonomy to manage their internal affairs, but with this autonomy must come clear and transparent accountability to the government, parliament, students and the wider society.

The ultimate goal of management should be to enhance the institutional mission by ensuring high-quality teaching, training and research, and services to the community. This objective requires governance that combines social vision, including understanding of global issues, with efficient managerial skills. Leadership in higher education is thus a major social responsibility and can be significantly strengthened through dialogue with all stakeholders, especially teachers and students, in higher education. The participation of teaching faculty in the governing bodies of higher education institutions should be taken into account, within the framework of current institutional arrangements, bearing in mind the need to keep the size of these bodies within reasonable bounds.

Sharing knowledge

The principle of true partnership amongst higher education institutions worldwide is crucial for education and training in all fields that encourage an understanding of global issues, the role of democratic governance and skilled

human resources in their resolution, and the need for living together with different cultures and values. The practice of multilingualism, faculty and student exchange programmes and institutional linkage to promote intellectual and scientific co-operation should be an integral part of all higher education systems.

CONCLUSION:

In the context of globalization, educational system should make suitable changes which will enable the students to find their own place in future. The academic excellence can be achieved in our institutions by having well defined visions which are global in nature, and yet been sensitive to local needs and environment, being transparent and being sincere in trying to achieve the goals and also by doing all academic activities in a systemic and planned way and having the knowledge of latest information.

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