

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This is an era where much is being discussed about higher education by various stake holders involved in it including the policy makers, students and employers. The far reaching changes now taking place in the world politically, economically, socially, culturally, and technologically, as well as the entry of human values into a society based on knowledge and information, underline the profound importance of higher education, today.

In the world of higher education, 9th of October 1998, was a date of unique importance, as it was the day on which the worlds first ever World Conference on Higher Education was concluded. Representatives from all UN-member nations met in Paris to discuss matters and issues pertaining to higher education the world over and agreed on the nature and policies of higher education we need for the 21st century. The conference convened by UNESCO, participated by over 4000 representatives from over 180 countries was a universal forum for all sectors of higher education; teachers, students, researchers, Legislators, NGOs, businesses as well as various sectors of the society, to meet and discuss issues of higher education.

In convening the World Conference on Higher Education UNESCO's objective was to lay down the fundamental policies and guidelines for in-depth reform of higher education systems throughout the world. The conference laid down that the basis for renewal and renovations of education must be access on the basis of merit, renovation of systems and institutions, and service to society and closer links with the world of work – And for these milestones to be achieved, the conference emphasized that higher education should enjoy autonomy and freedom exercised with responsibility.

The World Declaration on Higher Education is the major achievement of the above World Conference, and it is regarded as an authentic, official document for all members (including Sri Lanka) to guide their own HE polices at national, and institutional levels. Thus it could be of enormous relevance and assistance to all our tertiary educational institutions including universities, to follow and adhere to, in formulating their own future destinies.

The official summary of the World Declaration on Higher Education is given below quoted from the official UNESCO documents with acknowledgment in that regard. It is hoped that these proposals will be a guiding light for all of us officials, authorities, students and other stake-holders including employers (services), who are involved in higher education in numerous ways.

WORLD DECLARATION ON HIGHER EDUCATION / UNESCO GUIDELINES

1. Higher education shall be **equally accessible** to all on the basis of merit, in keeping with Article 26.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As a consequence, no discrimination can be accepted in granting access to higher education on grounds of race, gender, language, religion or economic, cultural or social distinctions, or physical disabilities.

2. The core missions of higher education systems (to educate, to train, to undertake research and, in particular, to contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of society as a whole) should be preserved, reinforced and further expanded, namely **to produce highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens** and to provide them with opportunities **for higher learning throughout life**. Moreover, higher education has acquired an unprecedented role in the present-day society. As a vital component of cultural, social, economic and political development and as a pillar of endogenous capacity-building, the consolidation of human rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace, in a context of justice. It is the duty of higher education to ensure that the values and ideals of a culture of peace prevail.

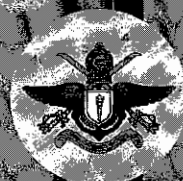
3. Higher education institutions and their personnel and students should preserve and develop their crucial functions, through the exercise of ethics and scientific and intellectual vigour in their various activities. They should also enhance their **critical and forward looking** function, through the ongoing analysis of emerging social, economic, cultural and political trends, providing a focus for forecasting, warning and prevention. They should enjoy full **academic autonomy and freedom**, while being fully responsible and **accountable** to society.

4. **Relevance in higher education should be assessed in terms of the fit between what society expects of institutions and what they do.** For this, institutions and systems, in particular in their reinforced relations with the world of work, should **base their long-term orientations on societal aims and needs, including the respect of cultures and environment protection.** Developing entrepreneurial skills and initiatives should become major concerns of higher education. Special attention should be paid to higher education's role of service to society, especially activities aimed at eliminating poverty, intolerance, violence, illiteracy, hunger, environmental degradation and disease, and to activities aiming at the development of peace, through an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach.

5. Higher education is part of a seamless system, starting with early childhood and primary education and continuing through life. The contribution of higher education to the development of the whole education system and the reordering of **its links with all levels of education, in particular with secondary education, should be a priority.** Secondary education should both prepare for and facilitate access to higher education as well as offer broad training and prepare students for active life.

6. **Diversifying** higher education models and recruitment methods and criteria is essential both to meet demand and to give students the rigorous background and training required by the twenty-first century. Learners must have an optimal range of choice and the acquisition of knowledge and know-how should be viewed in a **lifelong perspective**, based on flexible entry and exit points within the system.

7. **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 infrastructure and the academic environment. Particular attention should be paid **to the advancement of knowledge through research.** Higher education institutions in all regions should be committed to



transparent internal and external evaluation, conducted openly by independent specialists. However, due attention should be paid to specific institutional, national and regional contexts in order to take into account diversity and **to avoid uniformity**. There is a perceived need for a new vision and paradigm of higher education, which should be student-oriented. To achieve this goal, curricula need to be recast so as to go beyond simple cognitive mastery of disciplines and include the acquisition of skills, competencies and abilities for communication, creative and critical analysis, independent thinking and team work in multicultural contexts.

8. A vigorous policy of **staff development is an** essential element for higher education institutions. Clear policies should be established concerning **higher education teachers**, so as to update and improve their skills, with stimulus for constant innovation in curriculum, teaching and learning methods, and with an 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.

9. National and institutional decision-makers should place **students** and their needs at the center of their concerns and should consider them as major partners and responsible stakeholders in the renewal of higher education. Guidance and counseling services should be developed, in co-operation with student organizations, to take account of the needs of ever more diversified categories of learners. Students who do drop out should have suitable opportunities to return to higher education if and when appropriate. Institutions should educate students to become well informed and deeply motivated citizens, who can think, critically analyse problems of society, look for solutions to the problems of society, apply them and accept social responsibilities,

10. Measures must be taken or reinforced **to ensure the participation of women in higher education**, in particular at the decision-making level and in all disciplines in which they are under-represented. Further efforts are required to eliminate all gender stereotyping in higher education. To overcome obstacles and to enhance the access of women to higher education remains an urgent priority in the renewal process of systems and institutions.

11. The potential of **new information and communication technologies** for the renewal of higher education by extending and diversifying delivery and by making knowledge and information available to a wider public should be fully utilized. Equitable access to these should be assured through international co-operation and support to countries that lack capacities to acquire such tools. Adapting these technologies to national, regional and local needs and securing technical, educational, management and institutional systems to sustain them should be a priority.

12. Higher education should be considered as a **public service**. While diversified sources of funding, private and public, are necessary, **public support for higher education and research remains essential** to ensure a balanced achievement of its educational and social missions. Management and financing in higher education should be instruments to improve quality and relevance. This requires the development of



appropriate planning and policy-analysis capacities and strategies, based on **partnerships** between higher education institutions and responsible state authorities. Autonomy to manage internal affairs is necessary, but with clear and transparent accountability to society.

13. The **international dimension** of higher education is an inherent part of its quality. **Networking**, which has emerged as a major means of action, should be based on **sharing, solidarity** and **equality** among partners. The 'brain drain' has yet to be stemmed, since it continues to deprive the developing countries and those in transition, of the high level expertise necessary to accelerate their socio-economic progress. Priority should be given to training programmes in the developing countries, in centers of excellence forming regional and international networks, with short periods of specialized and intensive study abroad.

14. Regional and international normative instruments for the recognition of studies and diplomas should be ratified and implemented, including certification of skills, competencies and abilities of graduates making it easier for students to change courses, in order to facilitate mobility within and between national systems.

15. Close **partnership** amongst all stakeholders-national and institutional policy-makers, governments and parliaments, the media, teaching and related staff, researchers, students and their families, the world of work, community groups – is required in order to set in a movement for the in-depth reform and renewal of higher education.

- Reference :
1. Higher Education in the Twenty First Century – UNESCO – Paris 5 – 9 October 1998 ED-/98/CONF.202/CLD.49]
 2. Towards an Agenda 21 for Higher Education – ED/98/CONF.202/CLD.lg]
 3. UNESCO publication – July – 1998

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