

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century

Vision and Action

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Sweden

Note1: To meet UNESCO publishing standards, some editing of papers has been required.

Note2: Authors are responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in signed articles and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Sweden

**Speech of Mr Carl Tham
Delivered by H.E. Mr Ingemar Lindahl
Permanent Delegate to UNESCO**

We stand on the threshold of the Information Society. While sentiments like this have been expressed so often in recent years that they have become a cliché, they are nevertheless true. And the question of how we approach these impending revolutionary changes is appropriate to raise at this conference, with its focus on the process of change.

A generation ago we spoke of the transition from agriculture to industry. Today we speak instead about completely new vocational areas. The break-through of the new technology and the growth of the interconnected global economy imply a major transformation of our world. In virtually every sector of the labour market, the structure of work has changed, and more and more professions are making new demands on higher education. Studies over the years into the distribution of the labour force among different occupational categories indicate that the information sector is growing more and more dominant. In 1970, 27% of the Swedish labour force worked in the information sector, while the forecast for 2010 is for 50%.

It is against this background that interest in higher education is growing. It was a wise initiative on UNESCO's part to call this conference. And it is important that the declaration and the plan of action be concrete and clear. Article 1 in the draft declaration expresses well the Swedish position on "visions and actions" for higher education during the 21st Century:

["Higher Education provides an open space of higher learning and learning through-out life, as an opportunity for individual development and social mobility, in order to educate for full citizenship, with a worldwide vision and active participation in society, for endogenous capacity building, the consolidation of human rights, democracy and peace."]

Democracy, gender and racial equality, tuition-free higher education, the right to adult education, and close contact between education and research are the five foundations of Swedish higher education.

During the 1990's we have carried out several reforms that accord very well with Article 1A in the draft of the "Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development of Higher Education".

The Swedish university, with its open educational system, is a natural part of our democratic system. It is based on:

- ◆ Freedom to Learn
- ◆ Freedom to Research
- ◆ Freedom to Publish and
- ◆ Freedom to Return through out Life

Tuition-free education and a well-organized system of loans and grants are practical examples of how Sweden established a political and financial framework so that higher education is accessible to all on the basis of merit. This also relates to Article 1A in the "Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development of Higher Education", which it has been proposed that this conference adopt.

A fundamental principle for the development of higher education in Sweden is the government's policy of redistribution, dividing resources fairly and equally on the social or class level, between men and women, and geographically.

This is why we are building more colleges and universities. New colleges are being founded while older institutions of higher learning are establishing branch campuses in new communities to extend their geographic distribution evenly around the country.

The interaction of colleges and universities with the surrounding community is stressed in the Higher Education Act, since academic institutions need an external stimulus. Just as society is dependent on the knowledge uncovered within the institutions of higher education, the researchers are dependent on society.

Libraries, both academic and public, are part of the infrastructure that is crucial for the information society. As the UNESCO public library manifesto says "The public library shall in principle be free. The public library is the responsibility of local and national authorities."

There are several particularly important points in our national policies that are reflected in the draft document:

1. Colleges and universities hold a key role in the extensive discussion of the conditions of democracy and the significance of national and international declarations on human equality. Colleges and universities shall work to clarify the foundations and values of democracy -- this is perhaps their most important task -- which is stressed in Article 1A in the "World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century" under the heading "Missions and Functions of Higher Education".

The task of higher education is also to develop and spread a scientific approach, which is established in Article 2 in the World Declaration under the heading "Missions and Functions of Higher Education".

2. Equality between men and women is not just a question of justice but also one of democracy and of quality. In order to achieve this goal, the institutions of higher education must extend their recruitment efforts, as concerns both undergraduate programmes and graduate studies. This position should be strengthened in the text in Article 4A in the World Declaration, under the heading "Shaping a New Vision of Higher Education".

3. Much of the instruction and examinations in colleges and universities are still carried out in a very traditional manner, and in many cases pedagogical renewal advances extremely slowly. Instructors must find new ways to encourage critical analysis, creativity, and independent learning.

4. As emphasized in Article 10 in the World Declaration in "Shaping a New Vision of Higher Education", students should be given increased influence as major actors. They should be given the opportunity to share responsibility for the content and implementation of educational programmes.

5. Distance Education must be extended and expanded. Properly used, the new technology, with its potential for interactive learning and access to information, can mean a revolution in both the educational programmes and the reach of schools. Article 12 in the World Declaration takes up "The Potential and Challenge of Technology", and is extremely relevant for distance education. Technology can also promote internationalization and contribute to the free exchange of ideas around the world.

In its continued work UNESCO must make manifest its role as the international organization that puts education first. This position must be clarified, not just to spread information about the organization but also to create more goodwill so that all member nations will be motivated to take part, as well as to pay their dues.

One approach to accomplish this is to concentrate on several key areas, as UNESCO cannot do everything everywhere. If the educational programme is focused on four clearly defined functions, it will be easier to make UNESCO's contributions more visible:

First, to be forward-looking, a targeted vision: the contributions from the participants in this conference, our visions, should lead to realistic guidelines for higher education for the near future. We are all aware that these guidelines should be based on cultural diversity and human rights.

Second, there is UNESCO's documentary role -- to follow up, evaluate, and faithfully record the achievements, as well as the failures -- which is an important task.

Third, as an international intellectual organization, UNESCO has a unique opportunity to work for the development of ability and competence, as well as to serve as a clearing house on issues of human capacity and intellectual enrichment.

Fourth, there is the establishment of norms and standards. The implementation of UNESCO's many programmes depends on the political will of the governments of the member states. Since UNESCO's programmes have in common a presumption of democratic principles and respect for human rights, UNESCO's role in setting these standards is of immense importance.

UNESCO has not been alone in observing that the growing global information society demands an increased focus on education. The World Bank is one example of an organization that has arrived at similar conclusions. UNESCO should take advantage of the situation and rather than compete, offer an invitation for productive co-operation, maintaining the initiative as an international intellectual meeting place. This demands concentration and a realistic strategy. It is in the member countries, and within UNESCO, that the visions, the dreams, and the ideas will emerge.

This is the way UNESCO can play an important role within higher education as we move into the next millennium.