University Community and EFA – *Creating and Sustaining Improvements*

Views from
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First, UNESCO should be commended for organizing this international meeting aimed at involving universities in the EFA process. There has been a perception that EFA deals mainly with basic and primary education and is therefore of little concern to universities. This is not true, as the wider objectives of EFA in promoting social, economic and sustainable development are very much in the ambit of universities.

The three primary objectives of universities are: teaching, research and service to the community. A pragmatic approach would therefore be to consider how universities can assist in achieving the identified goals of EFA through those objectives.

Teaching

There is no doubt that a major thrust for achieving EFA is teacher training and most universities are already involved in the process through their Faculties of Education. But this is not so everywhere. In many countries teacher training is not carried out by universities but by separate institutes or colleges usually falling under ministries of education. In such cases, it is imperative that close linkages be established between universities and such institutions.

The major challenge facing developing countries is producing the very large number of teachers required both in primary and secondary schools. The existing teachers have also to be re-trained. This is a mammoth task and it is most unlikely that the targeted numbers can be met by using the traditional face-to-face approach of teacher education. Distance education, and where appropriate e-learning, will have to be resorted to. This is already being done in some countries, but small states have difficulties in putting up the appropriate infrastructure and training the staff for coping with distance education and/or e-learning. This is where regional or international collaboration can be of great help. For example, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) already has a proposal for setting up a Virtual University for small states in the Commonwealth in which teacher training features prominently.

Universities are also well positioned for promoting quality of education in schools, one of the six goals of EFA, since they themselves are at present required to satisfy quality criteria.

With the forthcoming Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, universities are also ideally placed, because of the multi-disciplinary approach required for sustainable development, to ensure that the concepts of sustainable development are properly integrated in the curricula of teacher training.

Research

This is a rich terrain for the involvement of universities and there are so many pedagogical and sociological areas that can be researched to inform policy makers and support the EFA process in a country. Some examples are:

- What should be the language used in educating pre-primary and primary children?
- What is the best way to assess literacy and numeracy skills?
- What is the best approach to be used in promoting adult literacy? Are learning capacities of children and adults the same?
- How can the educational objectives be met in rural areas, where resources are so scarce?

In all cases the research findings in other countries should be used but they should be adapted to the local context. Some of the simpler and less fundamental issues can be studied through final year Bachelor's dissertations of students, whether in education or sociology or other fields. The deeper problems can be researched through Master's and PhD theses, or as faculty projects.

Community Service

Through their faculty and students, universities have enormous potential for promoting EFA through community service. During their vacation and during weekends, students can assist disadvantaged and handicapped children in literacy and numeracy programmes. They can also assist illiterate adults in rural areas and poor communities. Medical students, local or foreign, can educate and inculcate scientific principles in rural areas during their short elective periods. This can be particularly useful in areas affected by HIV/AIDS where the population is unaware of the effectiveness of preventive measures.

Here are two examples of community service involvement of the University of Mauritius in support of Government's policy of promoting computer proficiency among the whole population:

(i) For two weeks during the vacation period, a group of primary school children are brought to the computer labs of the University and are exposed to the uses of the computer. In almost all cases the children have never been exposed to a computer. The tutors are all students following IT programmes at the University.

(ii) The Government has launched a Computer Proficiency Programme (CPP) whereby the computer labs in secondary schools, unutilized in the late afternoons/evenings, are used to run computer proficiency courses for teachers and the general public against a fee. The software has been developed at the University of Mauritius whose faculty also assists in running the courses. The private sector also participates in the CPP. So far, several thousands of people have benefited from the CPP.

How to Move Forward?

UNESCO has taken the right step to discuss the matter at an international level. This should then be followed up by similar meetings at regional levels. The assistance of university associations can be of great help and should be sought. The International Association of Universities, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the *Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie*, all of which have international membership, can assist. So can regional associations such as the Association of African Universities or the Association of Indian Universities.

But what is crucially important is that, in each country, universities must form part of the EFA process, which is not happening in all countries at present. EFA and sustainable development can only be achieved if all levels of the education system understand and own the process to enable them to contribute effectively.

UNESCO's small step in involving the university community can become a big leap in achieving EFA.

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