



Caribbean Conference on Higher Education

April 11-13, 2010 - Paramaribo, Suriname

Speech for the Opening Ceremony

By Maria Levens

Director

Department of Human Development, Education and Culture

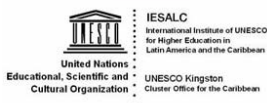
Organization of American States

Your Excellency, the President of the Republic of Suriname, Runaldo Ronald Venetiaan Excellencies, ministers of education and their distinguished staff, in particular Minister Wolf, high authorities of educational institutions, distinguished guests, members of the press, and last but not least, my colleagues from the international organizations. Good evening to all of you and welcome.

Thank you for having responded so well to our invitation on such short notice. Thank you for your understanding of those moments when we, the organizers of this conference, had to divert our attention from you to respond to the devastating situations abruptly caused by the heavy earthquakes in our OAS member states, Haiti and Chile. But, here we are at the conference which had its origin more than a year ago in Quito, Ecuador.

We were traveling from country to country in the Latin American region in preparation for, among other educational issues, the UNESCO's World Conference on Higher Education in Paris. And we noticed that while the hemispheric meetings organized by the UNESCO's Institute for Higher Education

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of Latin America and the Caribbean, IESALC, were open to representatives from Latin America and the Caribbean, we did not see much evidence of Caribbean attendance to shape the policies and adjust them to their needs. So I told my friend, Jose Renato, who is heading this UNESCO institute in Caracas, that we ought to do something to open the way for more Caribbean participation.

We know that Caribbean countries do business in Latin America. We know that hundreds of Caribbean students are studying in LA. Individual Caribbean institutions for Higher Education have bilateral cooperation agreements with Latin American institutions, and they are part of Latin American networks. And, Caribbean governments and institutions themselves, have a strong interest in the enhancement of their own tertiary educational systems. So why, then, do we miss the Caribbean at these large regional conferences and other policy meetings?

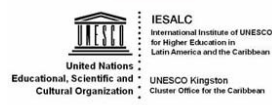
Perhaps, because while all the issues discussed at the world conference are universal, the application is different for small states with small economies. Could this difference be one of the reasons that the Caribbean countries are not participating to their fullest in the UNESCO conferences in Latin America?

Let us explore in the next two days some of the reasons...

Let us find out why internationalization or cross-border education could be both an advantage and a challenge.

Let us find out how much solidarity there is from strong universities towards institutions who might need some help while they are bringing up their standards. Let us find out how much solidarity there is for universities in Haiti whose buildings collapsed and who lost both professors and students.

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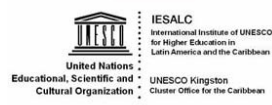
Prof Lumarque of the University of Quesquea wrote us this week this week that he wanted to be here but that he cannot come because his university is falling apart. He is afraid he will have to shut down the university. I have to fire 50 % of my professors he said because I don't have enough students to go forward. The students simply cannot afford to go to school because they have no one to support them.

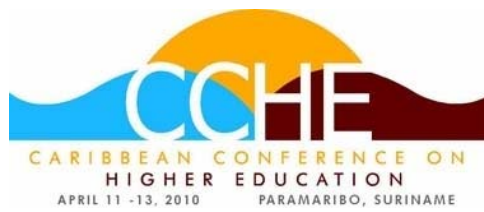
Dear participants to this conference, we have 2 days to find out what are the advantages of solidarity, advantages of closer cooperation throughout the hemisphere and in what ways we can cooperate because there are many, many ways.

For instance: the OAS is a regional organization and we manage to bring the world of education in Latin America and the Caribbean together through the meeting of the ministers of education of all 34 OAS member states. Can we perhaps use this mechanism, the meeting of ministers of education, to support cooperation in the area of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean? Why not use this mechanism to set policies for promoting stronger cooperation between LA and the Caribbean? Can we make a commitment to a special project and identify which countries might provide capacity strengthening to others? Let's see if we can take some of those best practices in theory and put them to work in fact. Since it is my department which is responsible for organizing the meeting of ministers of Latin America and the Caribbean, I would be honored to be your messenger.

Dear Participants, I welcome you again and I thank the Government of Suriname for her gracious and strong support. Without this support, Mr. President and

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Minister of Education of Suriname, this conference simply would not have been possible. I would like to thank the President of the Republic of Suriname, for being here with us despite his very, very busy schedule.

I would like to thank the UNESCO's Institute for Higher Education in Caracas - IESALC under the leadership of Jose Renato Carvalho, for having been a strong partner from the start, and I wish to thank the UNESCO cluster office for the Caribbean in Jamaica headed by Kwame Boafo, for strongly partnering with us to make this conference happen. Finally, last but certainly not least, I would be remiss if I did not thank the private sector from Suriname who contributed strongly and thank the private sector from the Caribbean for its generous support in bringing us together.

I wish you success and you can count on me during the coming days.

Thank you.

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