



Caribbean Conference on Higher Education

April 11-13, 2010 - Paramaribo, Suriname

Speech for the Opening Ceremony

His Excellency Runaldo Ronald Venetiaan
President
Republic of Suriname

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the republic of suriname. First of all, i would like to acknowledge and congratulate the ministry of education of suriname, the unesco and the oas, for taking the initiative to organize this caribbean conference on higher education. The government of suriname is pleased it has the opportunity to contribute to this important conference.

Allow me also to comment on the proposed session on solidarity with haiti. Haiti needs our help in many ways, and i am satisfied that special attention will be given during this conference, to the higher education system in haiti. So let us all listen carefully to the voice of the government of haiti, and support their strategy for recovery and revitalization.

At the summit of the americas last year in port of spain, trinidad and tobago, the presidents of the region decided that we would like to increase access to higher education to 40% in our countries by 2020. This goal will force the caribbean region to come up with a strong program in education to make that happen. For, compared to the rest of the world (latin america at 35% and western europe and north america at 70%), the caribbean at 7% falls short when it comes to access to post-secondary education. We indeed face great challenges and we have constraints. But access to post-secondary education in the caribbean has grown just 1%, while latin america has grown some 13% over the past decade. These figures come from unesco. I therefore urge you, ministers and institutions of

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higher education, to keep these figures in mind as you confer with one another over the coming days.

I take it that in the data presented for the caribbean, the numbers of students who have left their home country after secondary school to study at universities and other institutions of higher education in the u.s.a., canada, latin america, europe, and even asia, namely india and china, have not been included. Perhaps they have not been included, because with their departure abroad and further studies at institutions outside the caribbean, the students take their first steps in the process of brain drain, which has such a serious impact for our respective countries. Some caribbean students do return to their home country, but when the statistics of migrating intellectuals are tallied, the final returnee figure is probably negative.

Institutions of higher education are not only important to be able to produce statistics on brain drain. Being trained and educated in one's own country has advantages:

- Academically trained persons, from students to professors, remain in the country, and this pool of educated persons doubtlessly raises the general intellectual level of the nation; and this is important for the further development of arts and culture, the introduction and implementation of new technologies, but also for the respect for human rights, and in general for democracy and the rule of law.
- Intellectuals develop themselves in an environment in which the problems and issues of their own country are manifest; the interest in as well as the potential for finding solutions for specific problems are then greater.
- Academic exchanges with foreign institutions is more beneficial, for the chance of return is greater when the own caribbean institutions for higher education are responsible for organizing the exchanges.

In most caribbean countries, education is a high government priority. This includes the health sector, for the health of students is a prerequisite for good attendance rates at all levels of education – including higher education. I would like to mention what suriname has done to illustrate the efforts of caribbean governments for you. In suriname, education is free from early childhood through university. Administrative and tuition fees which are charged are far below the real costs of education. We took a conscious decision to subsidize education, so as to allow everyone access to education as a requirement for personal success in life and to increase the potential to contribute to the development of the

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country. School attendance rate at age 4 is as high as 98%. Nevertheless, the challenge we face is how to keep our children in school and ensure that they have the opportunity to continue their education through secondary school and beyond. And this is a challenge not only for us in suriname, but for the caribbean region as a whole.

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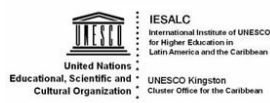
A new challenge which our governments face involves dealing with private and commercial enterprises, which increasingly want to offer cross-border education. While these institutions can help to increase access to higher education, it is necessary that we monitor the quality of the education they are offering, and that we ensure that these institutions are accredited. Typically, their tuition fees are as high as non-subsidized universities abroad, and it is not always clear whether the degrees they offer are recognized. We must be vigilant that these institutions do not start their activities without notice to the government or an institution recognized by the government. We must also take care that we do not succumb to international pressure for total privatization of education, which may have an unintended consequence of widening the gap between rich and poor.

Driven by national legislation, our countries should guarantee the quality of the programs of all educational institutions operating in the caribbean, and ensure their proper accreditation. While we support diversity, we must take responsibility for the quality of education at all levels, both public and private.

The caribbean governments will certainly continue to support accessibility to good and top quality education for all, and will keep on investing in their educational system. This is one way in which we have decided to redistribute our country's income. It is a good investment, for the return is high, namely a well-educated people who can largely take care of themselves and can contribute to their nation's development.

It must be said that in spite our efforts, we are confronted by low scores in regional and international statistics, like the ones i mentioned earlier. But let us not be pushed into a trauma about arrears in our development. We are young nations, generally with young institutions of higher education, which are seeking their way in a rapidly changing national environment and a dynamic, rapidly

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globalizing world. In spite of this, we have managed to find our way past the multiple global crises that have plagued the world.

The small scale of the caribbean communities does lead to a lack of financial resources and a lack of expertise for education and research in different disciplines, as well as insufficient services being rendered to society by our academic institutions. The solution for many of these problems lies in good collaboration, which will put an end to clinging to the orientation towards the objectives and structures of institutions of our former colonizers, as well as the persistent individual orientation of many of our experts towards a possibility of success in institutions outside the caribbean.

Our efforts at collaboration have not been sustainable so far. There is an urgent need for us to change this, not only under pressure from external institutions like the european union and other donor organizations, but preferably on the basis of our own caribbean initiatives for our own institutions of higher education.

The oas and unesco have given us, caribbean countries and institutions, gathered here for this caribbean conference on higher education, an urgent signal that it is high time for a caribbean forum to work towards synchronization of the activities and facilities of our respective institutions of higher education, with due respect for the specific characteristics of over caribbean diversity.

Let us open ourselves to the call that is embedded in this signal, and let us give one effective caribbean answer to the identified need of our caribbean nations.

I declare this carib bean conference on higher education opened.

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