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The Role Of Higher Education In Latin America And The Caribbean: A View From UNESCO

By José Renato de Carvalho
Director a.i.
UNESCO-IESALC

Honorable
Minister Omayra Leeflang
Minister of Education, Culture and Youth of Netherlands Antilles

Distinguished professors,

Hilary Beckles
Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the UWI – Barbados

Mark Bray
Professor at the University of Hong Kong

Honorable
Ministers and Representatives of the Ministries of Education of the Caribbean countries,
Chancellors, Principals and Directors of Caribbean Universities,
Professors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

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The objective of this Session 1 is to outline basic references for the debate on the trends and perspectives of higher education in the Caribbean. As part of it, I was supposed to present the UNESCO vision on higher education.

Ezra Pound, a poet who was well versed in presenting visions and feelings of someone else, reminded us that translator and traitor have the same Latin etymology. Aware of this, I would not dare to present in 20 minutes the wealth of UNESCO positions on this subject but to briefly introduce some principles and values that I regard as central to UNESCO's vision on the development of higher education worldwide. It is a personal and from the outset, a partial and fragmented account on this vision.

UNESCO's vision is stated in the final declarations of the two World Conferences on Higher Education (Paris 1998 and Paris 2009)¹ each one of them were preceded by a series of preparatory regional conferences in all regions of the world, two of them in Latin America and the Caribbean (La Habana 1996 and Cartagena de Indias 2008)².

Rather than resulting from an internal work, the UNESCO position is based upon numerous sources (studies, researches, debates, forums, seminars, conferences, etc) and resulted from a broad consensus reached by the main stakeholders of higher education from all over the world. Though organized around the official representativeness of the State Members, all conferences had an impressive participation of politicians, academics, experts, officials and representatives of higher education institutions, development agencies, international organizations, NGO's, associations and networks, donors etc.

The World Conferences proved to be effective platforms for sharing knowledge, experiences and expectations and for negotiating common references for academic cooperation and knowledge production. The conferences' declarations represent a shared agenda capable of articulating social groups with distinct values and interests into a process of social transformation, a transformation of higher education in this case.

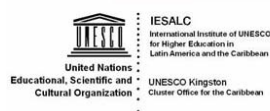
¹ World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action. (UNESCO, Paris, 9 October 1998).

Communique of the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education: The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development. (UNESCO, Paris, 5 – 8 July 2009)

² Declaration about Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. Regional Conference on Policies and Strategies for the Transformation of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (Havana, Cuba, 18 – 22 November 1996)

Declaration of the Regional Conference on Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean – CRES 2008 (Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, 4 - 6 June 2008)

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But first I would like to comment on some facts and ideas from which this vision emerged.

From the end of the 60's onwards, higher education experienced a remarkable expansion and transformation all over the world. It's worth remembering that by 1965 there were around 13 million students worldwide, which increased to around 140 million by 2005. Since 1999, total enrollment worldwide has increased by around 50 million. As a region, Latin America and the Caribbean has followed along the same trend. In the 1960s we had close to 500,000 students; today, we have almost 18 million students, representing a far faster growth rate than the global average (3600% x 1100%).

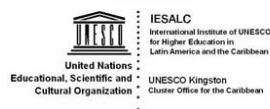
This growth was followed by a profound change in the institutional framework of higher education including: the creation of a variety of institutions, strengthening of networks and academic associations, establishment of evaluation and accreditation agencies, multiplication and diversification of training areas and programs of studies, growth of postgraduate programs, professionalization of teaching staff, and an increase in R&D activities, among others. Some authors have described this process as the transition from the elite to the mass model of higher education.

This evolution of higher education actively continued into the mid-1990s when UNESCO summoned its first conferences which were to be framed partially by the features and outcomes of this process of expansion and transformation. Beyond that, the recognition of the increasing importance of knowledge in the configuration of the rapid change of all dimensions of social life was producing new demands on higher education. Systems and institutions were asked to assume new functions and play a more active role in supporting the social and economic changing processes.

Meanwhile, many developing states were facing serious fiscal crisis and were subjected to economic adjustment policies that ultimately led to the reduction of investment capacity of the public sector. This ultimately led to the debate on the role of state in relation to the development of higher.

The conferences were to review the path and perspectives of the transformation of higher education that was taking place at the time and to set basic principles for its enhancement. Issues such as the role of higher education in contemporary societies and its connections with society and with the productive sector, role of state and private sector, access and equity, quality of formation, higher education and production of knowledge and innovation, potentialities of new technologies to support, the impact of the internationalization and the emergence of new providers and new forms of higher education provision were to be analyzed in the

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conferences. Ten years later, the II World Conference proposes to revisit most of these themes, trying to identify the emergence of new themes, new priorities, “the new dynamics of higher education and research for societal changes”.

Previously to the UNESCO Conference, a set of influential ideas and proposals was addressing these issues and driving much of the actions, policies and programs of governments, international organizations and development agencies.

A founding reference to this framework was the document published in 1975 called “The Crisis of Democracy”, a report³ presented to the Trilateral commission, a group of leading personalities from the US, Western Europe and Japan. The report inquired into the threats to the political stability and development of modern democratic societies.

The document presented a very critical view on the organization and functioning of higher education. This sector was classified, with some exceptions, as “parochial, conservative, chaotic, inefficient, poorly operated...” working at a “cross-purpose with society” and fomenting a sense of opposition in the students. According to the authors, the expansion of the higher education system had led to an “overproduction of people with university education in relation to the jobs available for them,” This as a waste of scarce public money and a source of personal frustration. This sort of higher education and “demanding intellectuals” were two important sources of political instability for democracy in the developed world.

The recommendations were: to restrict the expansion process and to link higher education planning to the patterns of economic development and job opportunities”. Education planning should be connected to economic and political goals,” political goals here were related to the control of the sources of political instability.

Another ideas and recommendations were very well expressed in documents published by the World Bank⁴ from mid-80’s onwards,

³ Michel Crozier, M.J., Huntington, S.P. and Watanuki, J. 1975. The Crisis of Democracy. Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission. New York, New York University Press.

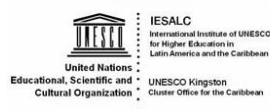
⁴ World Bank 1986. Financing education in developing countries: an exploration of policy options. Washington DC: World Bank.

World Bank 1994. Higher education: the lessons of experience. Washington DC: World Bank.

Johnstone, D.B. 1998. The financing and management of higher education: a status report on worldwide reforms. Washington DC: World Bank

World Bank and UNESCO (Task Force on Higher Education and Society) 2000. Higher education in developing countries: peril and promise. Washington DC: World Bank.

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An initial argument was that the return rate of both private and social investment in basic education is higher than tertiary education and it is even higher in developing countries in comparison with developed Countries. So, in a context of fiscal crisis and financial restriction, the first “policy options” for developed and developing countries alike were to reduce public investment in higher education by transferring its costs to the students and their families, stimulating the creation of private and communitarian institutions and concentrating public investment in basic education (Sguissardi, 2006). The State could provide some sort of financial support to students, mainly for those coming from lower economic strata of society, but essentially should support credit schemes for the students and their families.

Still looking for strategies to reduce public investment in higher education, a second group of arguments looked into the organizational model of public institutions. The higher education institutions were oriented to promote a management and funding reform and to adopt market-oriented administrative procedures. So should act the State in the provision of resources to higher education. It was said that the market rules were more effective to rule the functioning of higher education institutions. It was said that most of institutional reform worldwide was market-oriented. The traditional model of university was considered too expensive and the increasing demand should be met by new models of institutions (the diversification thesis) and by new providers, mainly from the private sector.

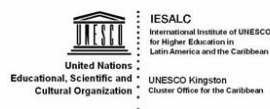
Along with these arguments, came up the proposal of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to include Education as a tradable good in the General Agreement on Tariffs, Trade and Services, which would eventually lead to the opening of the “national education markets” to international providers.

So these were the three unfolding elements which set the background of the conferences on higher education: the issues related to the expansion and transformation of higher education, those related to new demands coming from a changing world where knowledge, science and technology and innovation assumed a central role and, third an influential group of ideas. Let’s see briefly results of the debate on these issues.

ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Though recognizing the importance of training skilled labor force and of contributing for a competitive insertion of nations and economic sectors in a globalized market, the conferences defined a much broader role for higher

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education, regarded as a fundamental and irreplaceable resource for the construction of a better future for our societies, an “*essential component for the cultural, socio-economic and environmentally sustainable development of individuals, communities and nations*” (1998 WCHE). More than training skilled labor force, higher education shall educate for citizenship and for an active and critical participation in all dimensions of social life.

Relevance was the concept emphasized by the 1998 WCHE as the expression of the long-term commitment of higher education institutions to the elimination of the main problems affecting our societies, many of them common to most of the countries in the region, such as poverty, intolerance, violence, illiteracy, hunger, environmental degradation and disease.

EDUCACION COMO UN BIEN PÚBLICO

All conferences declared higher education as “social public good, a human right and a duty of the State.” The concept of “public good” derive from the assumption of its irreplaceable role for the construction of a better future for societies, as the bearer or provider of a good or service of permanent interest of society. The “human right” shall express the real possibility of access to higher education by all citizens entitled and wishing to.

“Here I must emphasize the unquestionable role of the State in initiating and defining policies, in guaranteeing equality of opportunity in the interests of social cohesion ...” (2009 WCHE Report) and in assuring to higher education institutions the real conditions to the provision of goods and services of public interest.

INCLUSION AND ACCESS AND SUCCESS

Despite the impressive expansion of higher education, the gross enrolment rate in Latin America and the Caribbean is still too low. The President of Suriname mentioned yesterday the goal of reaching an enrolment rate of 40% set by the presidents and heads of state in the TT Meeting till 2020. For that we shall create 10 million new posts in the region.

No discrimination can be accepted in the process of granting access to higher education. Access for members of special target groups, such as indigenous peoples, cultural and linguistic minorities, disadvantaged groups, peoples living under occupation and those who suffer from disabilities, must be actively facilitated.

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“Efforts should be made to eliminate political and social barriers whereby women are underrepresented and in particular to enhance their active involvement at policy and decision-making levels within higher education and society.” (1998 WCHE Declaration) In Latin America and the Caribbean these barriers are also found at the postgraduate studies and the decision-making levels at the higher education institution.

“However, it is not enough to open doors, these students must be guided towards success ... hence the need for a system that provides information, guidance on courses, personal tutoring and support.” (2009 WCHE Report)

Diversifying higher education models and recruitment methods and criteria are essential both to meet increasing international demand and to provide access to various delivery modes and to extend access to an ever-wider public, in a lifelong perspective, based on flexible entry and exit points to and from the system of higher education.

More diversified systems of higher education are characterized by new types of tertiary institutions: public, private and non-profit institutions, amongst others. Institutions should be able to offer a wide variety of education and training opportunities: traditional degrees, short courses, part-time study, flexible schedules, modularized courses, supported learning at a distance, etc.

However the State shall grant to these institutions the same conditions and support given to traditional universities, otherwise a segmentation of the higher education system between at least two types of institutions will be produced.

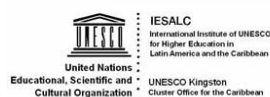
PUBLIC GOOD AND PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

The needs and challenges connected to higher education development are of tremendous complexity. Public resources may be not enough to meet them. It is required the concerted involvement of all higher education stakeholders.

We must therefore turn to private partnerships, but this must be done in complete transparency and with a due regard for quality and always bearing in mind that public support for higher education and research remains absolutely essential to ensure a balanced achievement of educational and social accomplishments.

However the regional conferences reacted against the proposal of the WTO to include education as a tradable service in the GATTs. The Declarations of both conferences warned against this proposal. The Declaration of CRES 2008 states that *“Such incorporation represents a strong threat to the construction of pertinent*

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higher education in the countries that accept the commitments demanded by the General Agreement on Tariffs, Trade and Services, and its acceptance involves serious injury to the humanitarian proposals of comprehensive education and to national sovereignty” (CRES 2008) and explicitly warn the LAC countries against it.

QUANTITY AND QUALITY

“There can be no equity unless the education offered is of sufficient quality, and there can be no quality unless teaching and institutions are evaluated. Quality is not an absolute; it should be measured by its degree of appropriateness, in terms of set objectives and local conditions” (2009 WCHE Report) and shall reflect the objectives of the national higher education proposal.

“Quality must not be understood as conforming to a norm, to a single model. Diversity must be preserved in all circumstances as a source of creativity and innovation.” (idem).

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

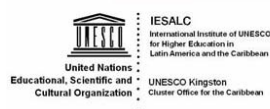
Despite research is not the only important to develop higher education, it is imperative to promote postgraduate studies and apply new information and communications technologies to innovate in contents and educational methodologies, as well as to widen access to higher learning.

The advancement of knowledge through research is an essential function of all systems of higher education, which should promote postgraduate studies. Innovation, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity should be promoted and reinforced in programs with long-term orientations on social and cultural aims and needs. An appropriate balance should be established between basic and target-oriented research. (1998 WCHE Declaration)

The rapid breakthroughs in new information and communication technologies will further change the way knowledge is developed, acquired and delivered. It is also important to note that the new technologies offer opportunities to innovate on course content and teaching methods and to widen access to higher learning. (idem)

INTERNATIONALIZATION AND ACADEMIC MOBILITY

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The internationalization of our institutions is both a source of cooperation and a source of competition. We live in an interconnected and interdependent world....” (2009 WCHE Report).

Engaging in networks, technology transfer, capacity-building, developing teaching materials and sharing experience of their application in teaching, training and research, making knowledge accessible to all; (b) creating new learning environments, are some examples of the positive perspectives of the internationalization (1998 WCHE Declaration).

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. International co-operation schemes should be based on long-term partnerships between institutions in the South and the North, and also promote South-South co-operation.

ACADEMIC COOPERATION AND INTEGRATION

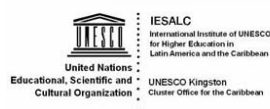
Regional cooperation must be fostered between countries in the same geographical region that have similar objectives and the same approach to problems in higher education. ... But this process is just one example, there are others; we must be particularly careful not to import models that are incompatible with local conditions. Lastly, international cooperation should only happen if it respects cultural diversity and its corollary, linguistic diversity. (2009 WCHE Report)

The principle of solidarity and true partnership amongst higher education institutions worldwide is crucial for education and training in all fields that encourage an understanding of global issues, the role of democratic governance and skilled human resources in their resolution, and the need for living together with different cultures and values. The practice of multilingualism, faculty and student exchange programs and institutional linkage to promote intellectual and scientific co-operation should be an integral part of all higher education systems.⁹⁸

Regional and international normative instruments for the recognition of studies should be ratified and implemented, including certification of the skills, competences and abilities of graduates, making it easier for students to change courses, in order to facilitate mobility within and between national systems. (1998 WCHE)

Partnership and alliances amongst stakeholders - national and institutional policy-makers, teaching and related staff, researchers and students, and administrative

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and technical personnel in institutions of higher education, the world of work, community groups - is a powerful force in managing change. Also, non-governmental organizations are key actors in this process. Henceforth, partnership, based on common interest, mutual respect and credibility, should be a prime matrix for renewal in higher education. (1998 WCHE)

AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Academic freedom is of paramount importance in setting priorities and taking decisions on the basis of public values that lie at the foundation of science and social well being. Autonomy is a right and a necessary condition for unfettered academic work, while also being an enormous responsibility in the fulfilling of its mission with quality, pertinence, efficiency and transparency in the face of society's challenges. This also includes social accountability. Autonomy involves social commitment, and both must go hand in hand.

winternal affairs, but with this autonomy must come clear and transparent accountability to the government, parliament, students and the wider society. (1998 WCHE).

These were some of the principles and recommendations behind the UNESCO vision. We must have in mind that these proposals coming out of a forum which had the participation of stakeholders from the higher education system from all part of the world. They reflect a consensus that was possible at the time and shall be considered as a basic reference to the much deeper debate each country has to do about their own vision on the future of higher education for their country.

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