

World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action

World Conference on Higher Education (1998)

Main provisions relating to right to education

Preamble

We, participants in the World Conference on Higher Education, assembled at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, from 5 to 9 October 1998,

Recalling also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states in Article 26, paragraph 1, that 'Everyone has the right to education' and that 'higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit', and endorsing the basic principles of the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), which, by Article 4, commits the States Parties to it to 'make higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of individual capacity',

Convinced that education is a fundamental pillar of human rights, democracy, sustainable development and peace, and shall therefore become accessible to all throughout life,

Proclaim the following:

Shaping a new vision of higher education

Article 3. Equity of access

- (a) In keeping with Article 26.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, admission to higher education should be based on the merit, capacity, efforts, perseverance and devotion, showed by those seeking access to it, and can take place in a lifelong scheme, at any time, with due recognition of previously acquired skills. As a consequence, no discrimination can be accepted in granting access to higher education on grounds of race, gender, language or religion, or economic, cultural or social distinctions, or physical disabilities.
- (b) Equity of access to higher education should begin with the reinforcement and, if need be, the reordering of its links with all other levels of education, particularly with secondary education. (...) However, access to higher education should remain open to those successfully completing secondary school, or its equivalent, or presenting entry qualifications, as far as possible, at any age and without any discrimination.
- (c) As a consequence, the rapid and wide-reaching demand for higher education requires, where appropriate, all policies concerning access to higher education to give priority in the future to the approach based on the merit of the individual, as defined in Article 3(a) above.
- (d) Access to higher education for members of some 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, since these groups as collectivities and as individuals may have both experience and talent that can be of great value for the development of societies and nations. Special material help and educational solutions can help overcome the obstacles that these groups face, both in accessing and in continuing higher education.

Article 4. Enhancing participation and promoting the role of women

- (a) Although significant progress has been achieved to enhance the access of women to higher education, various socio-economic, cultural and political obstacles continue in many places in

the world to impede their full access and effective integration. To overcome them remains an urgent priority in the renewal process for ensuring an equitable and non-discriminatory system of higher education based on the principle of merit.

Article 6. Long-term orientation based on relevance

- (a) (...) The concern is to provide access to both broad general education and targeted, career-specific education, often interdisciplinary, focusing on skills and aptitudes, both of which equip individuals to live in a variety of changing settings, and to be able to change occupations.

Article 8. Diversification for enhanced equity of opportunity

- (a) Diversifying higher education models and recruitment methods and criteria is 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.

Article 9. Innovative educational approaches: critical thinking and creativity

- (a) In a world undergoing rapid changes, there is a perceived need for a new vision and paradigm of higher education, which should be student-oriented, calling in most countries for in-depth reforms and an open access policy so as to cater for ever more diversified categories of people,

We, the participants in the World Conference on Higher Education, adopt this Declaration and reaffirm the right of all people to education and the right of access to higher education based on individual merit and capacity.

(...) To achieve the goals set forth in this Declaration and, in particular, for immediate action, we agree on the following Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development of Higher Education.

Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development of Higher Education

I. Priority action at national level

- 1.** States, including their governments, parliaments and other decision-makers, should:
 - (a) establish, where appropriate, the legislative, political and financial framework for the reform and further development of higher education, in keeping with the terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which establishes that higher education shall be 'accessible to all on the basis of merit'. No discrimination can be accepted, no one can be excluded from higher education or its study fields, degree levels and types of institutions on grounds of race, gender, language, religion, or age or because of any economic or social distinctions or physical disabilities;
 - (d) develop higher education institutions to include lifelong learning approaches;
 - (j) establish clear policies concerning higher education teachers.
- 3.** The interface with general, technical and professional secondary education should be reviewed in depth, in the context of lifelong learning. However, preparation for higher education should not (...) be the sole or primary purpose of secondary education, which should also prepare for the world of work.

4. Concrete steps should be taken to reduce the widening gap between industrially developed and developing countries, in particular the least developed countries, with regard to higher education and research. Concrete steps are also needed to encourage increased co-operation between countries at all levels of economic development with regard to higher education and research.

III. Actions to be taken at international level and, in particular, to be initiated by UNESCO

10. Co-operation should be conceived of as an integral part of the institutional missions of higher education institutions and systems.
11. UNESCO, and other intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations (...) should further promote international academic mobility as a means to advance knowledge and knowledge-sharing in order to bring about and promote solidarity as a main element of the global knowledge society of tomorrow,
12. (...) UNESCO should take initiatives to develop higher education throughout the world, setting itself clear-cut goals that could lead to tangible results. One method might be to implement projects in different regions renewing efforts towards creating and/or strengthening centres of excellence in developing countries, in particular through the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme, relying on networks of national, regional and international higher education institutions.
13. UNESCO (...) should also undertake action in order to alleviate the negative effects of 'brain drain' and to shift to a dynamic process of 'brain gain'. (...) A vigorous campaign should be launched through the concerted effort of the international community and on the basis of academic solidarity and should encourage the return to their home country of expatriate academics, as well as the involvement of university volunteers - newly retired academics or young academics at the beginning of their career - who wish to teach and undertake research at higher education institutions in developing countries.
14. Within this framework, UNESCO should:
 - (a) promote better co-ordination among intergovernmental, supranational and nongovernmental organizations, agencies and foundations that sponsor existing programmes and projects for international co-operation in higher education.
 - (b) jointly with the United Nations University and with National Commissions and various intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, become a forum of reflection on higher education issues.
 - (c) take specific action to support institutions of higher education in the least developed parts of the world and in regions suffering the effects of conflict or natural disasters;
 - (d) make renewed efforts towards creating or/and strengthening centres of excellence in developing countries;
 - (e) take the initiative to draw up an international instrument on academic freedom, autonomy and social responsibility in connection with the Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel;