

**CANADIAN INTERVENTION
ON THE OCCASION OF
THE UNESCO WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION
PARIS, OCTOBER 5-9, 1998**

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October 7, 1998

Canadian Intervention

Mr. President,
Ministers,
Excellencies,
and Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Minister Sonko for assuming the Chair of this most important and historic conference on the eve of the new millennium. The future of higher education, and indeed the future of generations to come will be profoundly influenced by the direction we choose to take in determining how we will shape the rapidly evolving world of higher education.

Canada acknowledges the magnitude of the task we have laid out before us and we are pleased to be represented at this conference, as at past conferences, by Canadians from government, NGOs, educational institutions, and associations representing a wide range of actors and decision makers in the field of higher education. In a few minutes, I will call upon my colleague, the Honourable Pauline Marois, Minister of Education for Quebec and Deputy Head of the Canadian Delegation, who will present the second part of our intervention in French, Canada's other official language.

Over the past two years, Canadians have maintained an active interest in the preparations for this conference. At UNESCO's request, a meeting in Toronto in April of this year brought together Canadian and American stakeholders to discuss the issues and challenges higher education is facing. One of the key principles arising from this meeting was the recognition that academic success is an integral part of the mission of higher education and that it is also a responsibility shared among universities, students, and society.

Consequently, the evaluation of academic success must involve students, universities and society. The outcomes of this meeting were conveyed to the UNESCO Secretariat as the North American contribution to the debate. As you may be aware, the complete report, as well as a summary of the proceedings, has been distributed at this conference.

The Canadian delegation strongly believes that the Declaration and the Framework for Priority Action should be based on a forward-looking vision of higher education, with no hesitation between past roles and future visions, on issues such as public funding, the relationship with the world of work, and the vision of research and its role in the area of innovation. The relationship between education, the work place, and the value of information will play a central role in the future evolution of the dynamics of the global society.

Canada feels that economic concerns should be balanced with civic and social concerns, such as the values inherent in learning to live together, one of the four pillars of the Report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century. In this sense, education focussed only on knowledge risks endangering the social and civic missions of higher education.

A society can respect human rights, foster a culture of peace and function as a democracy by promoting education for a viable future only if its citizens have acquired the ability, and here we stress the importance of attitudes and skills as well as knowledge, for living in their local, national, and global communities.

It is crucial that nations take steps to broaden access to postsecondary education in order to meet both economic and social objectives. In an earlier era, secondary education came to be seen as essential to full participation in the economy and society. Now, it is increasingly accepted that some level of education or training beyond secondary school is required. Increased access will be meaningful only if it takes into account all groups that make up our respective communities.

As the Chair of the Executive Board, Ambassador Pàtaki, stated earlier, access for underrepresented groups and for communities with specific needs such as minorities, the disabled, and Aboriginal peoples must be reinforced. Increased access for women is a prime example of this challenge. In the future, governments will need to ensure that higher education is as affordable and broadly available as secondary education has now become.

Not only is the required level of education increasing, the types of skills and knowledge needed to participate effectively in today's economy and society are continually changing. This demands that higher education become more dynamic and relevant, and equip graduates with the flexibility they will need to adapt to change and to learn throughout their lives. Graduates with these skills will be better equipped to contribute to the development of their own countries.

We look forward to working with our global partners to reinforce the education of girls and women as a development priority and look forward to their increased participation in forums of dialogue and debate; women in the past have too often been absent in key roles. Canada has had some success in terms of access and is prepared to continue in this vein.

For example, Canada is one of the top three countries in the world in terms of female participation rates, with women having significantly higher education participation rates than men, even in some professional programs. We can point to broadening access if we take women's participation as a key indicator.

Canada also acknowledges the importance of broadening access to higher education for linguistic minorities. The existence of institutions and the availability of programs in official languages deserves our greatest support, since they are an essential element of accessibility. The existence of two or more linguistic groups in a country is a challenge for education and should be

addressed, taking into account the desirability of preserving the cultural integrity of different countries and of avoiding the abrogation of diverse learning systems in favour of a single model.

In identifying the growing gap between developed and developing countries, a number of key issues must be dealt with if our collective efforts in international cooperation are to bear fruit.

As was eloquently stated by both Prime Minister Jospin and by Director General Mayor, among others, the transformation of higher education through enhanced accessibility and the use of information and communication technologies has the potential to reduce socio-economic differences among members of a society and among different societies. It can be the great equalizer.

Similarly, higher education may assist in promoting equality and co-operation among countries in all regions of the world.

Thus, we have a clear mission, both within countries and among nations, to emphasize the values, methods, and technologies of tertiary education with the objective of progressing towards the greater equality that we prize. If we fail to fulfill this mission, higher education will in fact become another means of entrenching inequalities within countries, contributing to further divergence in economic and social development internationally.

Canada, like many other nations, has a long-standing tradition of international cooperation, and is also interested in the dissemination of technology-mediated learning. Moreover, our international cooperation strategy strives for a similar approach to ensure that basic educational needs are acknowledged in our efforts to eliminate poverty through sustainable human development. To this end, we look forward to continuing to work with other countries to ensure that the transformation of higher education through emerging pedagogical methods will move the international community towards closer partnerships, equality and harmony.

I will now call on Madame Marois.

Thank you Mr. Petter. Mr. Petter just now spoke of the transformation of higher education, which will demand linkage with the realities and requirements of the transition toward a knowledge-based society. It is our belief that a linear vision of education becomes irrelevant in such an environment. Higher learning institutions will increasingly become only one option among many other knowledge providers. The declaration and the action plan should acknowledge that education in general, and higher education in particular, is going through a transitional phase. The institutional capacity to adapt to ongoing transformations within the next two decades will have a great influence on the role of universities and other higher education institutions in our society.

With respect to universities, two of their central roles are research and graduate training. For Canada, these are essential, since we do more of our research in universities than any other OECD country. This notion should be reinforced.

Canada acknowledges the need for a more innovative view of lifelong learning and appreciates the efforts made to integrate into the conference documents the lifelong learning approach, as expressed in the Delors Report and in the work of the Hamburg Conference on Adult Education.

In Canada and elsewhere, a discontinuous education experience is becoming more and more a reality because of several factors: an increase in the number of adult learners, school dropouts, the development of continuing education and on-the-job training, the impact of new technologies, and the rising number of international exchanges and programs.

Part of the process of adopting a lifelong learning approach is the need to recognize nonformal or nontraditional education. It is not enough to offer a range of education programs or delivery modes; there have to be approaches designed to ensure recognition of all forms of education and training, including bridging programs and prior learning assessment and recognition. Canada acknowledges that emerging trends, such as the increase in the mobility of individuals and the dissemination of knowledge through new information technologies, and the impact these will have on education, will need greater attention.

We acknowledge that we still have a lot of work to do in these areas. The challenges before us will not be met overnight; we have, however, made some progress in these areas through, for instance, our distance-learning universities and colleges, and the research we are doing through the National Centres of Excellence.

The learner-centred and learning-centred approach must be at the heart of higher education, reflecting the vision expressed at the 45th session of the International Conference on Education and the Hamburg Conference on Adult Education. We believe that lifelong learning needs to be developed more actively, acknowledging that education remains the basis for achieving this goal. As stated in the Delors Report, that will be done only by a reconfiguration of the system, not just by adding-on, since articulation with a strong basic education is crucial. Indeed, Canada recognizes that higher education should be built on a strong inclusive and public education system as a whole.

Canada's systems of higher education vary from one province to another, as do its institutions of higher learning. Universities, colleges and other education service providers take on diverse roles, according to the needs of their populations and communities. We believe that this diversity constitutes the richness and strength of our systems.

Canada has successfully addressed the issue of flexibility with its broad array of higher education options, which include universities, polytechnical institutions, professional schools,

colleges of applied arts and technology, cégeps, and community colleges. By virtue of their linkages with industry, colleges and institutes play an integral role in preparing a competitive work force and contribute directly to the economic prosperity of the country.

Recognizing the importance of the differentiation and diversity of our systems, I am proud to inform you that the Association of Community Colleges of Canada in collaboration with national and international partners will host in Québec City the first-ever World Congress of Colleges and Polytechnics. From May 29 to June 1, 1999, leaders and representatives of community colleges, cégeps, and polytechnics from around the world will attend the congress, which will be a signal to the world that college education has emerged as a significant presence in responding to the exploding need for a strong work force, as well as cultural and societal expectations.

The *World Declaration on Higher Education*, the adoption of which will be the ultimate outcome of this world conference, underlies the *Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development of Higher Education*. The framework defines various priority actions at the institutional, national, and international levels.

I would like to deal specifically with national-level proposals, those aimed at the state, governments, and education-system policy makers. I believe it is important to stress that no matter how good their intentions nor how wise the advice they receive, governments cannot by themselves carry out large-scale measures designed to guide higher education and bring about in-depth change in the sector. Undeniably, universities, higher-education institutions, and NGO partners and communities must be involved as well, using approaches and methods appropriate to each country.

Students and academics also need to be involved, as do existing authorities — whether academic, teaching, or administrative — at both the institutional level and within faculties and departments.

This partnership is an indispensable component of any initiative. Indeed, universities can bring to the table a large pool of ideas and expertise that can enrich policy options. In addition, a shared approach to reflection will bring about a degree of renewed interest in and attention to existing challenges, while paving the way for future cooperation when the time comes to implement chosen options and carry out necessary reform.

To achieve this, UNESCO must continue to exist in the capacity of a forum for ongoing dialogue and cooperation among Member States, all the while facilitating technical cooperation and the exchange of expertise and information.

It is self-evident that if the work and the efforts of this conference are to make a real difference for the future, some form of effective implementation and follow-up must be put into place. Canada firmly agrees with the view expressed in the framework for Priority Action that the

role of coordinating future change in higher education falls firmly within the mandate of UNESCO. In order to fulfil this mandate, UNESCO must strive to establish strategic partnerships and alliances with other international organizations to avoid overlap in programming and to ensure effective coordination leading to the achievement of identified goals.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all participants the utmost success in the ongoing work of the conference and look forward to the adoption of documents that we have every reason to believe will provide guidance to move forward. I am firmly convinced that in Canada we will take the necessary steps to ensure an appropriate follow-up to the important work we will accomplish together here in Paris.