

## **Summit of the Americas**

First Forum of University Presidents

*Prosperity and Education: The Challenge of Co-operation in the Americas –  
The Role of Universities*

Plenary Session

**The Importance of Higher Education in the Development of the Region**

*Is Your University Fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?*

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### **Outline**

After re-affirming the values that should unite all the universities of the Americas we ask whether our individual institutions are fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century when measured against the conference themes of cooperation and prosperity. Universities in both North and South America fail the cooperation test. In South America there is little cooperation between the higher education systems in different countries, whereas student mobility in and out of North America bypasses South America.

The picture is no rosier when we examine the theme of prosperity. *The Economist* calls today's young people 'generation jobless'. There is a cruel mismatch between the focus of university programmes and the needs of the labour market. Moreover, this is at a time when the inflation of tuition fees, especially in the US, risks closing off higher education as a ladder of opportunity for poorer people. Finally, universities, having been slow to embrace the information technologies that are transforming all other industries, are now transfixed by MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) that do not have a business model because they do not lead to credentials.

### **Introduction**

It is a great honour to address this First Forum of University Presidents to be held in conjunction with the Summit of the Americas. This is an historic summit. It marks the first forum of universities and Cuba is participating for the first time. These two developments complement each other.

I'm sure that there will be discussions in the political meetings - and in the corridors outside the meetings – about the eligibility criteria for being here. But I hope that as university presidents from the countries in the Americas we are united by our commitment to the simple academic dogma that 'knowledge is important'. This is the simplest definition of the fundamental purpose of our institutions.

I imagine we also agree that one of the ways we express that purpose is to develop in our students the academic mode of thinking, which can be defined as an attitude of systematic scepticism. How far we achieve this – in any of our countries – is a moot point, but in an era when some nasty ideologies are on the march again we should be

training our students to question the dubious propositions that are urged on them from all sides.

You will be relieved to know, however, that today I shall not attempt to follow Cardinal Newman and explore fundamental questions about the idea of a university. I shall stick to the theme of the Forum: *Prosperity and Education: The Challenge of Co-operation in the Americas – The Role of Universities*. This plenary session focuses on *The Importance of Higher Education in the Development of the Region*.

We can easily agree that higher education is important to the development of the Americas but we must reach beyond such banalities. Are we maximising the contribution that each of our institutions makes to the societies that support us?

Are our universities fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Is your university fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? That question is the topic of this address. I will suggest that we are not as fit as we should be, either in our cooperation or in our contribution to prosperity.

### **The Challenge of Cooperation**

Let's start with the statement: *The Challenge of Cooperation in the Americas – The Role of Universities?*

The former Canadian Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Laureate, Lester Pearson, once said: "*How can there be peace without people understanding each other; and how can this be if they don't know each other?*" His statement is just as provocative if you substitute the word 'cooperation' for 'peace'. How can there be cooperation without people understanding each other; and how can this be if they don't know each other?

Student mobility is a vital catalyst of cooperation among countries and most especially among universities. Many of you have studied outside your own countries so you know what I mean.

I did my own doctorate in France and those four years of immersion in French culture and language have influenced my subsequent life much more than the knowledge I gained by researching a thesis on the metallurgy of uranium. Those years included direct experience of a student uprising as I lived through the events of May 1968. Those of you here from Chile know the feeling.

But I must say that May 1968, with its wonderful graffiti, reinforced rather than tarnished my love of France. I almost always buy French wine and I tend to give the benefit of the doubt to France when it takes stands on global issues – and in the last 50 years that has been difficult from time to time!

### University Cooperation in the Americas

I shall look at student mobility in the Americas in a moment but let me first look at the bigger picture of university cooperation in the Americas, which influences how students move.

After my studies in Paris I moved to Canada and in the mid-1970s joined the team creating the Télé-université within the Université du Québec. At that time the

president of the Université du Québec, Gilles Boulet, was very concerned about the lack of knowledge and deplorable lack of collaborative linkages between universities in South and North America. Noting that there were no organisations to promote such collaboration he initiated the creation of the Inter-American Organisation for Higher Education in 1979 and was its president for ten years. Twenty years later in 1998 UNESCO elevated its Regional Centre for Higher Education (CRESALC) into an international centre, IESALC, to strengthen cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean. You may know it.

I joined UNESCO as Assistant Director-General for Education soon after IESALC's creation. Under the guidance of my head of Higher Education, Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, who has co-authored this address, I had a close view of cooperation – or rather the lack of it – in Latin America. This was despite the good work of the Inter-American Organisation for Higher Education and the series of distinguished rectors from Latin America who have succeeded Gilles Boulet as its president.

It certainly didn't help university cooperation in the whole of the Americas that in UNESCO's world Canada and the US were linked not to IESALC but to UNESCO's Centre for Higher Education in Europe in Bucharest, which closed in 2011.

Our work in Latin America as senior UNESCO officials through IESALC taught us that there was very little cooperation in this region compared with what happens in the rest of the world. National higher education systems seem to exist as islands. There was no vision for integration at continental level and few common policies, tools or awareness of the regional labour market. The diversity of systems and their marked national differences, which could be a stimulus for rich interaction, seems instead to reinforce the closed and rigid nature of each system. This is not a situation where internationalism can get much of a hold.

Ironically, what does seem to unite Latin America's higher education community is a vociferously contested divide between public and private institutions, with a horror, on the public side, of private for-profit institutions.

This is particularly ironic when in Brazil, the region's largest country, private institutions represent more than 88% of all institutions and attract 74% of all enrolments at the undergraduate level. Brazil is home not only to the world's liveliest for-profit sector but also its biggest for-profit higher education enterprise.

Yet the rest of the region seems to be in denial about this fact and continues to parrot as a mantra the *non sequitur* that since higher education is a public good it should all be provided through state institutions for free. University people, be they students, academic faculty or rectors, tend to leave their intellectual integrity at home when they go out campaigning self-interestedly, and in the name of the public interest, for favours or subsidies from government. This is a worldwide phenomenon but Latin America has a particularly acute case of it.

Patterns of Student Mobility

But, when students are not out demonstrating, they know that they will live in world of reduced international barriers so they usually show greater openness to the world than their institutions. What do their movements tell us?

Sadly, the volume of student mobility within the Americas is dismal. You only have to spend a little time with the excellent interactive map of student mobility maintained by UNESCO's Institute of Statistics to see that the traffic of students among the countries of the Americas presents a sorry picture.

To take one statistic at random: the population of the Americas, if you leave out Canada and the USA, is twenty times larger than that of Saudi Arabia. Yet the number of students from Saudi Arabia studying in the US exceeds the total numbers coming there from the rest of Americas apart from Canada. The same goes for Canada if you do not count US students going there. Cooperation is difficult if people do not know each other.

It is revealing to look at the patterns of student mobility among countries. It is also difficult because, although UNESCO has statistics about where students go when they leave their countries to study overseas, they do not have figures, for most of Latin America, on the origins of the students who come to the country to study.

Brazil is an exception. Here are the flows of students into Brazil. From the Americas only Argentina and Paraguay make it into the top five countries sending students to Brazil, where students from Angola outnumber those from the US by more than three to one. Here are the flows of students out of Brazil. Apart from the US, the only country in the Americas that makes it into the top ten destinations is Cuba. Overall, Brazil sends twice as many students out as it takes in.

It is interesting to compare the numbers of students coming in to those going out around the Americas. Ecuador exports more than three times many students as it imports and there are similar disparities for Chile and Brazil. Cuba and the US are at the other end of the scale. Their exports of students represent only 7% of imports. If you look at where the imports come from, however, Cuba and the US present a sharp contrast.

Cuba has an impressive commitment to the Americas in its incoming students. All but three of the top sixteen countries from which it receives students are in the Americas, the exceptions being China, Pakistan and Angola.

The US and Canada show a very different pattern. Little of their foreign student intake involves the Americas. From the Americas only Canada and Mexico make it into the top ten countries sending students to the US and only Canada and the Dominican Republic figure among the top ten countries to which US students go.

Canada has even less student traffic with the Americas. Only the US makes it into the top ten sending and receiving countries, although Trinidad and Tobago comes in at number 11 for sending students to Canada.

I don't need to belabour the point. Are our universities in the Americas fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Not if cooperation within the Americas in the form of student mobility is an important criterion for fitness. This forum might be a good place to reflect on what to do about it and to reinforce the work of the Inter-American Organisation for Higher Education that I referred to earlier.

### **Higher Education in Turbulent Waters**

Let me now look more briefly at three other drivers of change that are creating a state of turbulence for universities worldwide. Some of you may have once been on this boat, called the *Maid of the Mist*. It takes you to the bottom of Niagara Falls if you are prepared to get a bit wet. Because of the mist you sometimes cannot see the falls, although you can always hear them. This is quite a nice analogy for the state of higher education: lots of noise and fog – but maybe a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow if the deluge of challenges doesn't drown us.

The three drivers of change I refer to are the challenging labour market for young people, the rising prices of higher education and the opportunities of technology. I shall look briefly at each one.

#### Generation Jobless

In 2013 *The Economist* newspaper called today's young people 'generation jobless'. It calculated that 300 million of them – one quarter of the world's youth – are not employed and are not in education or training either. Moreover at the same time employers often complain that they cannot find young people with the skills and knowledge that they do need.

Cristovam Buarque, then Minister of Education of Brazil, saw this coming ten years earlier when, speaking to a conference at UNESCO on the topic "The university at a crossroad" he said to the young people present: *"Be rebels... You are the first generation that faces a future that is less beneficial than the ones your parents looked forward to. You are the first generation where a university diploma does not mean an automatic passport to success. You are the first generation whose diploma will be obsolete long before you retire"*.

Our universities cannot be called fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century if there is a mismatch between what we teach and the lives that our graduates will lead. What we do about it will vary from country to country but there is a challenge for us everywhere.

#### The Cost of University

The same applies to the next issue, which is the cost of university study. The figures for the US shown in this slide show a common trend: state funding is dropping and being replaced by higher tuition fees. But the issues are different in each country. In the US universities are accused of pricing themselves out of the reach of ordinary people, whereas in some other countries the issue is whether there should be tuition fees at all.

Higher education costs money no matter who pays the bill. Not long ago some began

to promote the importance of higher education with the slogan that knowledge was the new oil – the new route to prosperity. The bottom promptly fell out of the price of oil. It might seem that the same is happening in parts of higher education. Less than two years ago it was reported that the average discount given on tuition fees in US public universities was 50%. Was this an adjustment to students' and parents' ability to pay or a result of competition from more efficient providers? It's probably a bit of both.

The sensible approach is to focus on the cost of higher education, not its price. We cannot call ourselves fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century if the economic structures of our universities are out of sync with reality.

### Technology: Challenge and Opportunity

This leads to our final point, which is the role of technology. Whole conferences are being devoted to the role of technology in higher education every week. Can we say anything intelligent in a few minutes?

First, to be fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century a university needs a technology strategy. That strategy may be to downplay the use of technology and concentrate on the university's other teaching assets. But even that strategy needs to be carefully thought through. Just waving the wand of 'blended learning'; saying that you intend to combine both onsite and online teaching is not a sufficient strategy. Student preferences for the mix will change and you must be ready to adapt.

Second, do not be transfixed by MOOCs. The good news about MOOCs is that they have alerted all universities to the potential of online learning and given its use a boost. If Harvard did it then we must follow! The bad news, however, is that there is no proven economic model for offering MOOCs. That is because MOOCs do not usually lead to credentials. One laudable exception is Brazil's Veduca, for which the Brazilian Ministry of Education issues certificates and students can be tested at some 240 centres nationwide.

Nevertheless, MOOCs can be valuable recreational and informal learning. My co-author and I have taken three MOOCs from the FutureLearn consortium, which has broken new ground in bringing high quality pedagogy to online learning, notably in its interactive features. The experiences were enjoyable.

Our final piece of advice is not to go firm too quickly on technology choices. Technology is evolving steadily and becoming cheaper and simpler. What's important is to decide what your university wants to do, if anything, to use online learning to further its mission.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude: is your university fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? We have suggested that if we are serious about the themes of this Forum and about treating the Americas as an important region, then we have a long way to go in expanding cooperation between our countries and institutions and getting the flow of mobile students to reflect this.

We have also drawn attention to the mismatch between university programmes and the labour market, to the importance of keeping costs down, and to the opportunities that technology presents for addressing all these challenges.

Reference

For student mobility see:

<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>