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Conference Ends With Call for Support of Higher Education Worldwide

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A global conference on higher education that drew more than 1,000 delegates—including a "who's who of higher-education leaders from around the world," in the words of one participant—concluded here on Wednesday with a call for greater access to higher education and increased financial support, despite the economic crisis.

National ministers of education, university presidents, representatives from intergovernmental organizations, and students were among those who gathered at the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, which was sponsored by Unesco, the United Nations education and science agency. The meeting focused on themes stemming from the tremendous growth in higher-education systems worldwide in recent years. In the 11 years since the previous Unesco higher-education conference, enrollments in postsecondary educational institutions have risen by more than 50 percent, to 153 million students.

A final communiqué issued on Wednesday called on Unesco's 193 member states to develop policies to achieve a range of goals, including ensuring adequate financial support for higher education, strengthening quality-assurance standards, guaranteeing that underrepresented groups have access to higher education, enhancing the academic profession, and combating degree mills. The document also called on Unesco, which is well-known for its emphasis on universal elementary education, to "reaffirm the priority of higher education in its future programs and budgets."

Georges Haddad, Unesco's director of higher education and one of the main organizers of the conference, said that the organization's commitment to higher education had never been in question. "This meeting has shown that Unesco is the organization that can convene all partners—member states, institutions, civil-society representatives, private-sector

representatives, international organizations, and intergovernmental organizations," he said in an interview. "This is where Unesco makes a difference."

Mr. Haddad pointed to the meeting's focus on Africa, where higher-education enrollments have risen faster than any other region in the world, as an example. The creation of a new African organization devoted to university governance and based in Cameroon was announced at the conference by the Association of Francophone Universities and the Association of Commonwealth Universities. Nahas Angula, prime minister of Namibia and his country's former education minister, took part in conference discussions on the establishment of an African higher-education and research area. He emphasized collaboration and strategic partnerships among African institutions, and the final communiqué endorsed the research area's establishment. "We want to focus and to strengthen research activity in Africa—research activity in Africa, by Africans, on specific areas which are related to African development," Mr. Haddad said. A forthcoming Unesco-backed project on African engineering will be another of the conference's substantive accomplishments, he added.

The four-day conference also focused on the themes contained in reports that were either published for the occasion or highlighted in the proceedings.

A Unesco report released this week on "A New Dynamic: Private Higher Education," explores the rise in private higher education, which now accounts for 30 percent of global higher-education enrollment. In some countries, the rate is much higher—more than 75 percent of institutions in India, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines, for example—while in Western Europe the public sector still dominates.

The growth of private higher education was widely discussed, both explicitly in sessions such as "Private Higher Education: Responding to Global Demand" and "Harnessing the Public and Private, Affirming Higher Education as a Public Responsibility," and as a recurring subtheme in broader sessions. While the fundamental nature of "higher education as a public good," as emphasized in the final communiqué's opening clause, underscored all of the discussions, there was also a pragmatic acknowledgment that, especially in a time of economic crisis, diverse sources of financing are essential. As Peter Okebukola, one of the conference's general rapporteurs, said in the closing session, "it must be recognized that public funds are limited."

Another new Unesco publication, the "Global Education Digest 2009," released this week by the organization's statistics office, examines new trends in student mobility. Here too, much has changed since the previous Unesco higher-education conference. In 1999, the report notes, one out of every four students who studied abroad did so in the United States. Although the overall number of mobile students grew by 53 percent between 1999 and 2007, the American share of that market did not, and only one in five internationally mobile students chose the United States in 2007.

In contrast, Australia, Canada, France, Italy, Japan, and South Africa have all experienced an increase in relative numbers. A partial explanation for that development, said Hendrik van der Pol, director of the Unesco statistics institute, is that internationally mobile students are increasingly opting to remain in their own regions as education opportunities there expand.

"Take Latin America. In 1999, 11 percent remained in their own region, now it is 23, more than double," he said. "We see it in the Arab states, and also in Africa, where South Africa has become a big draw."

The French translation of a World Bank report on "The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities" was also released to coincide with the conference. The report warns of the distorting effect of the growing focus on global rankings and says that there is no "magic formula for 'making' a world-class university."

In a message that resonated strongly at a conference with a focus on African universities, the report says that "each country must choose a strategy that plays to its strengths and resources."

Jamil Salmi, the report's author, said that unrealistic ambitions often shape national higher-education goals. "Many countries, especially the middle-income countries, partly because of this hype about rankings and being in the top, are interested in transforming some of their universities into world-class universities, or to create world-class universities from scratch." For most countries, said Mr. Salmi, a more important focus would be "to think in terms of having some programs of excellence, or institutions that can do research at the highest levels, and research that is relevant to deal with the needs of the country."

The American presence at the conference, which included the new under secretary of education and the head of the largest college in the country, Eduardo J. Padrón of Miami Dade College, reflected some of the shifting dynamics of global higher education.

The presence of a strong American delegation demonstrated "an increasing understanding that we need to learn the lessons of higher-education success in other countries," said Jamie P. Merisotis, president of the Lumina Foundation for Education. "We no longer have the highest degree attainment in world, and there are indicators that American higher education needs to learn as much as it can share from its own experience."

Mr. Merisotis attended the previous Unesco conference, and recalls that much of the discussion then centered on abstract issues of academic freedom. This year's gathering, he said, was far more targeted and substantive in its focus on issues relating to access, equity, and quality.

The follow-up to the current conference could be another decade in the making. "You have to give time to time," Mr. Haddad, the conference organizer, said philosophically when asked when it would take place. "Ten years are nothing in history."