

**DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION
EDUCATION POLICY COMMITTEE**

FINDINGS OF THE IMHE GENERAL CONFERENCE

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FINDINGS OF THE IMHE GENERAL CONFERENCE

Key facts about the General Conference

- The General Conference was held on 17-19 September 2012 at the OECD Conference Centre.
- The Conference attracted around 550 participants, predominantly higher education policy-makers, institutional leaders, academic experts active in higher education and students. The conference was designed so that participants were able to:
 - Listen to thought leaders and hear how the world is changing and what to do about it
 - Network, swap notes, make new connections, share experience and challenges with others and pick up fresh ideas
 - Ask an OECD expert to explain their work
- Keynote speakers included:

Professor José Mariano Gago	Former Minister of Higher Education of Portugal
Dr Carol Nicoll	Chief Commissioner, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), Australia
Professor Indira Samarasekera	President, University of Alberta, Canada
Professor John Sexton	President, New York University, USA
Professor Lap-Chee Tsui	Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong China
Dr. Žiga Turk	Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, Slovenia

- The Conference programme, presentations, videos, photos and media commentary are available on www.oecd.org/site/eduimhe12.

Conference theme: Attaining and Sustaining Mass Higher Education

- The 2012 Conference focused on Attaining and Sustaining Mass Higher Education. Around the world, mass higher education is either an aspiration or a reality. Yet this has thrown up many new issues and challenges for countries, including how to manage access, quality and accountability, funding and financing, institutional diversity, internationalisation, technology and the academic workforce.
- The goal of the Conference was to identify longer-term trends and included analyses of national and institutional policies, case studies and the latest research from the OECD and elsewhere. The Conference brought together many different perspectives and looked at the issues at the international, national, institutional, or sub-institutional level.

- The Conference was structured around 6 key questions:
 1. Where have we got to in attaining and sustaining mass higher education?
 2. What can higher education contribute to developing skills for the knowledge economy?
 3. How can higher education reconcile its different missions and roles?
 4. How can higher education maintain and improve quality?
 5. What does the future hold for mass higher education?
 6. How can higher education deal with the challenges it faces?

Some interesting findings to emerge

- The higher education landscape today is characterised by complexity, diversity and uncertainty. The implications of mass higher education and the ongoing expansion of higher education taking place alongside major political, social, and economic developments outside the higher education sector leads to many more questions than answers.
- Mass higher education is increasingly expected to fulfill political, economic and social objectives. It is not just about preparing young people for jobs. Higher education can, and should, play a role in promoting peace, democracy, citizenship and social outcomes. Higher education should enable people to think, communicate, develop character, embrace diversity, take a global perspective, handle complexity, develop creativity and be flexible.
- However, raised, but unrealistic, expectations about the benefits flowing from access to higher education especially in emerging and developing countries may lead to disappointment and frustration. But aspirations for social mobility through education are an almost unstoppable force and can lead to major social upheaval.
- In providing skills, there are challenges to reconcile immediate demands for greater employability with the longer-term requirements to prepare students to change, adapt and continue learning over the lifecycle. New employment opportunities replacing outmoded jobs mean economies are increasingly reliant on constant re-skilling and building new capacities.
- Universities need to nurture talent and pay greater attention to learning effectiveness. Students need to be placed at the centre of higher education and students need to be given greater voice in higher education. At the same time, universities do not have the monopoly on knowledge and learning takes place as much outside the classroom as within it.
- With more people than ever going on to higher education, diversified models make sense. But it is challenging to find the right model for diversification that successfully meets the needs of a wide range of students through different types of institutions – while at the same time, providing quality degrees for all students. At the same time, expanding access to higher education can be undercut by weaknesses in basic education that hold back completion rates in some countries and/or make it difficult to maintain academic standards.
- Everyone is seeking quality, but quality is still weakly defined and big questions remain over what is authentic learning, how to foster the ability to learn how to learn and how to create a quality culture within institutions that is fully supported by faculty. Public oversight can play some role in monitoring quality, through regulation, quality assurance and/or funding mechanisms. The labour market can also provide feedback on quality although employers may not agree on what quality they need, either among themselves or with the academic community.

- Mass higher education is creating greater economic competition and the cross-border nature of higher education has become much more important, through many different forms of collaboration and competition for mobile students. But there are also barriers to greater internationalization – migration policies affecting visas for academic staff and students, recognition of foreign credits and degrees, need for more flexible learning modes, including online/distant/open education etc.
- In much of the developed world, sustaining public funding for the mass higher education system and replacing an ageing academic population are reaching a critical point. At the same time, investments in education and research are booming in many rapidly growing economies, notably in Asia. However, even for these countries, as for much of the rest of the developing world, there are major concerns about quality, access and retaining academic capital.
- Technology is advancing more rapidly than ever before, opening up a wide range of new opportunities for teaching and learning. This includes greater capacity to individualise learning, to deploy more effective pedagogies, and to improve access by enabling distance learning. While technology would also change cost structures in higher education, it could not be assumed to be a cheaper option. The generational digital divide was also a challenge within higher education.
- Looking to the future, key questions include:
 - Is there a limit to expanding higher education, what happens if everyone has a university degree and can we ensure sustainable financing models?
 - How successfully do higher education institutions engage with evolving learning needs?
 - Who can make a systemic difference to closing skills gaps?
 - Can we shift from mass education to personalised lifelong learning for all?

Highlights of what worked really well

- Participants appreciated the plenary sessions which involved thought-provoking speakers and lively panel discussions with plenty of interactions, including questions from the floor
- Participants appreciated the opportunity to hear wide diversity of views from different stakeholder perspectives – including students. Given the increasingly global nature of higher education, they also appreciated hearing about higher education across many different country contexts and all stages of economic and social development.
- Participants enjoyed the “Ask the OECD expert” sessions, which in turn provided an excellent opportunity to present the wide range of OECD work to them.
- Everyone showed great interest in the visual record prepared by the artists of Creative Connection, which captured and displayed very effectively the richness and diversity of the Conference.