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Pathways Towards a Shared Future: Changing Roles of Higher Education in a
Globalized World

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HIGHER EDUCATION AND HUMAN AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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As the rector of the Technical University of Catalonia (UPC) and the president of the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI), I would like to thank the United Nations University and UNESCO for the opportunity to be here at this conference. I am eager to share and debate ideas in order to enrich our vision of the relevant social role that higher education is called upon to play in this increasingly globalized world.

The role of higher education in today's world is complex and vital. A wide range of challenges and possibilities are emerging, with political, economic and social implications. Perhaps most significant are the challenges associated with shifting **perspectives on knowledge** itself, which are influencing strongly the role and responsibility of universities in society.

The **role of higher education institutions** has been seen to change over time from preservers of culturally revered forms of knowledge to producers of highly skilled labour and research to meet perceived economic needs and, more recently, to agents of social transformation and development.

Universities are facing a very interesting period of great commitment. Globalization implies the possibility of taking advantage of important opportunities. However, it also presents challenges and poses serious problems for the future by calling into question the main value of universities: **servicing the common good**.

¹ This paper has been co-created by Peter Taylor, Cristina Escrigas and Francisco Lopez-Segreira.

CONTEXT

Globalization, which also affects higher education, is an irreversible phenomenon that is here to stay. But the way it progresses will depend on the global responses articulated in the present and near future, especially by higher education institutions, which are responsible for generating and spreading knowledge. We therefore have some collective responsibility for **how we help to build societies**.

As was said here, at the 2003 International UNU/UNESCO Conference 'Globalization with a Human Face':

A key goal... is to build international consensus on emerging norms and principles to respond to new challenges and dilemmas as a result of globalization. The trend towards homogenization of educational, cultural, scientific and communication activities is disquieting and risks bringing about uniformity of content and perspective at the expense of the world's creative diversity.

Higher education institutions, as well as the societies in which they operate, are currently undergoing a global transformation process in all contexts, although with specific characteristics in various parts of the world. The circumstances are therefore ideal for a critical and constructive analysis of the role of higher education in the world.

Humanity as a whole is now facing major challenges and profound problems related to coexistence and relations with the natural environment. It faces unresolved problems of social injustice, marginalization, exclusion, poverty, human-rights violations, lack of democracy, corruption, fraud, armed conflicts, and a development system that leads to the exhaustion and over-exploitation of natural resources and contributes to climate change. As a result, it is clear that we must re-examine our development model with a view to adopting a new, sustainable model—one which encompasses not only environmental considerations and the optimization of natural resources, but also economic, human, social and cultural issues and everything they involve.

More resources are now spent on education and knowledge generation than ever before. Science and technology have seen spectacular advances and global education rates at all age levels have reached historic highs. The **knowledge society** is truly starting to take shape. We need therefore question what role higher education should play in its mission to generate and spread knowledge in the service of human society. Based on the intrinsic definition of this

mission, higher education has to contribute to sustainable human development in the broadest possible sense.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education institutions are well positioned to link **the local and the global**. This gives them considerable access to and influence over change processes in many societies, and may enhance their potential to contribute to human and social development. They are therefore called upon to play a **fundamental role in building society**.

Higher education is responsible for training the professionals who, in the course of their careers, attain the **positions of greatest responsibility** in society and the labour market. The decisions of professionals throughout the world, trained in universities, can make a decisive contribution to the way life develops on this planet. This decision-making can take place through approaches that are either positive or negative for the global progress of humankind and societies, in both developed and developing countries. Higher education, therefore, plays a decisive and fundamental role in terms of the **teaching content, ethics, values and skills** it incorporates.

Higher education institutions are responsible for creating and spreading knowledge, and thus contributing to solutions to global problems. The **relationship between scientific research and social needs, mainly to support political decision-making with implications for the collective well-being**, needs to be explored and analysed. This is a neglected subject that higher education should address.

Education will play a vital role in the knowledge society. In some cases, higher education institutions may be perceived as disseminators of knowledge that fit within existing paradigms, these paradigms themselves having become unreliable and open to question. Universities, whose existence is justified in terms of their contribution to learning, shouldn't become weighed down by inertia, unable to learn themselves or to support the learning of others.

The 20th century saw the massive expansion of science and technology into every aspect of human life. A pressing task for the 21st century is to foster human capacities to absorb, critically examine and reflect on those earlier developments.

How to do this effectively, as well as rigorously, is a looming challenge and critical responsibility for the world's universities (Jasanoff, 2007).

TOWARDS A NEW IDEA OF DEVELOPMENT

Hotly debated over decades, and with origins in the field of biology, development has been equated by many with global economic growth, which would result in all peoples of the world achieving economic parity with those living in the developed nations. Over time, 'human development' has, however, acquired more complex meanings. The United Nations Development Programme states:

People are the real wealth of nations. Development is thus about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. And it is thus about much more than economic growth, which is only a means—if a very important one—of enlarging people's choices... Fundamental to enlarging these choices is building human capabilities... The most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long and healthy lives, to be educated, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Without these, many choices are simply not available, and many opportunities in life remain inaccessible ([UNDP website](#), accessed 2006).

Voices are now being raised, some from within the universities themselves, warning that the models that have guided development over the last century are now **exhausted**. Concepts are appearing that appeal to the need to rethink the current development paradigm and our **collective social values**.

Such a **shift in paradigm**, reflected in policies, is a laudable goal, and a number of well-known global frameworks and initiatives aim to support its achievement, including the Millennium Development Goals, the Kyoto Protocol, Education for All, Food for All, the UNESCO Decade for Sustainable Development and the High-Level Group Report on the Alliance of Civilizations. These frameworks do not guarantee positive change, however, as evidenced by slow progress or an absence of it. Progress is complicated by a wide range of variables that influence the process of human development, regardless of the goals and targets that are set.

THE CHALLENGE FACING HIGHER EDUCATION

If universities are to support human and social development and actively participate in positive social building processes, then **we need to go beyond narrow conceptions of knowledge.**

We need to incorporate **new transversal curriculum contents** that can equip individuals with new tools more suited to the context in which they will carry out their professions. Individual and collective responsibility in professional decision-making within new global ethical paradigms will be a subject for the immediate future.

In this global era, being prepared as a citizen who will interact with society through the exercise of a profession implies a complex vision of reality that demands inter- and transdisciplinary education. It also implies abilities and values such as a deep understanding of sustainable development as a collective social process to be learned; a need for common recognition and respect for different cultures for intercultural relations and support of diversity; the ability to deal with an exponential expansion of technology, without losing the human capacity to put it to common human service; and the need to set aside fear in order to confidently cooperate on peace building. We therefore need to accept the **complexity of reality** and the interdependence of areas of knowledge in a real interdisciplinary approach to education.

There is a need for real **engagement** between universities and society. This engagement may well extend far beyond national boundaries. The nature of such engagement needs to be debated and deliberated intensively, drawing on real examples, practices and experiences. We also need to understand the role that universities will play in this engagement, particularly the ways in which they engage with citizens—both individuals and groups. This may be achieved in part by the forging of new relationships by universities and the emergence of social and civic networks.

Research is assumed to be a vital part of the role of higher education, but there is a growing need to question the **paradigms of knowledge** and innovation that inform the research carried out in different contexts; the relationship of research carried out by institutions to its application in wider society; and the way in which social and human-development needs shape the research agenda.

It is clear that there are great differences in the ability of institutions around the world to engage in research due to a range of constraints. We need to ask what should be the nature of the policy framework for research if we are to give attention to issues of interdisciplinary research, **participatory research, action research and collaborative research.**

Universities can play an active role in debate and public and private action by generating responses to social transformations from an innovative perspective. This is a crucial moment to revisit the role of higher education, starting with the present and the past, **to project new visions of its role for the future**, and to rethink and propose ways for the **exchange of values between higher education institutions and society.**

Next year's **GUNI Report** will look into the role of higher education and higher education institutions and their contribution to human and social development in the context of globalization. This is a particularly important subject for GUNI, not only because it has a direct bearing on its commitment to its foundational mission, but also because it is the backdrop to a reappraisal of the role of higher education in the world and to an analysis of its impact on economies, politics, societies, cultures and human development. We wish to provide a space for debate with regard to **the role of knowledge in our society**, in which we consider **what knowledge for what kind of society** and how universities define their role in this regard.

Thank you.