

Education International (EI) IIIrd International Higher Education and Research Conference: Reasserting the Global Academic Community

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General report by Paul Bennett

Introduction

EI's third Higher Education and Research Conference has taken place in Montreal (Canada) in March 2002, at a time of exceptional challenges for our educational sector and the wider world. While we are still reeling from the consequences of "September 11" — and while the Conference took place, a newspaper headline read "Bush says the nuclear option is on the table" — the global community is still seeking to come to terms with the forces of globalization and trade liberalisation which were filling the headlines prior to "September 11". Higher Education and Research are in the forefront of the storm over globalization, but we are also key players in the intellectual, ethical and political struggles unleashed by "September 11".

However, the Montreal Conference has demonstrated that, daunting though these challenges are, EI and its Higher Education constituents are developing the means to face them. The Conference has provided the opportunity to build on the solid progress made at the EI's third World Congress in Jomtien (Thailand) in July 2001, where the Higher Education and Research sector's key role in the battle on globalization was amply recognised, and the policy tools to engage in that struggle were put in place. And the Higher Education sector within EI continues to grow. This conference includes participants from 37 unions from 27 countries with 900 000 members. The membership in the sector as a whole comprises approximately 1 million members in 30 Higher Education and Research specific unions and 55 General Teachers' unions. This steady growth is a tribute to EI and the sector's perception of EI's relevance to the needs of Higher Education and Research, as well as enabling EI to speak more authoritatively as the voice of the sector.

EI World President, Mary Hatwood Futrell in her remarks to the opening session, acknowledged these trends and the place of the sector in EI, and she set our work in the important and enduring context of EI's policies for widening access to education at all levels, and promoting the needs and interests of developing countries. Both these cornerstones of EI's beliefs must be held in focus as we confront the immediate challenges of globalization and of the global polity following "September 11". It is particularly significant therefore, that the world President endorsed the proposal to hold the next International Higher Education and Research Conference in an African country, to help focus our attention on that region and on the South.

UNESCO, ILO and the World Bank

The Conference has provided the opportunity to reassert the EI view that education, including higher education, is a public good, in the face of the growing pressures at the national and global levels. Dialogue with representatives of UNESCO, ILO and the World Bank, and discussions in workshop sessions, showed the need to continually and consistently press this view in the face of changing emphasises by the global policy making agencies, as they evolve their policies to accommodate global pressures to liberalise, privatise or commercialise education. The Conference noted the degree to which the World Bank appears to have evolved in recent years in order to acknowledge the role of civil society and the place of education in social and economic capacity building. However, the Conference recognised that, particularly from the perspective of the individual countries experiencing World Bank interventions, the net effects of the Bank's policies continue to be driven by the neoliberal agenda, undermining public services and the social infrastructure. Delegates distinguished between structures like UNESCO and the ILO, within which the views of the unions and civil society could be channelled, and the economic institutions such as the World Bank, WTO, the IMF and the OECD which are engaged in hard economic and political decision making. It was argued in the final session of the conference, that the future work of EI in the sector, including future conference agendas, must be more strongly action-oriented, to identify the roles of these international policymaking and funding bodies, and to engage with them more effectively.

The workshops identified the following criteria for the analysis and monitoring of the ILO, UNESCO and World Bank

1. Impact on structures of higher education and research
2. Impact on study programmes
3. Impact on public funding levels and processes
4. Impact on access to higher education and equalities
5. Impact on local and regional economies
6. Impact on cultural diversity
7. Impact on regulatory control and accreditation, and the quality of higher education
8. Impact on university governance, academic freedom and the historic role of universities as generators and disseminators of knowledge and sources of critical analysis

The Conference and workshops identified the following recommendations for future work as EI higher education and research affiliates, and for EI:

1. Monitor the evolving philosophies, missions and actions of the World Bank, ILO and UNESCO, including the forthcoming World Bank publication on higher education
2. Develop national case studies (drawing in the first instance on existing materials) of the work and impact of the World Bank.
(In both 1 and 2, bearing in mind the particular impact of the World Bank on developing countries)
3. Raise awareness among union members, other NGOs and the general public in our respective countries on the role of international institutions in respect of higher education and research
4. Prepare for the 2003 UNESCO meeting on higher education particularly by monitoring and challenging current attempts to weaken the Recommendation on the status of higher education teaching personnel
5. Promote the unions' alternative concept of global higher education

6. Defend national systems of accreditation and quality assurance against global models driven by commercial interests or criteria
7. Press for the effective implementation and monitoring of UNESCO and ILO Recommendations, using as appropriate, UNESCO National Commissions
8. Develop practical forms of solidarity for the higher education systems and unions in developing countries, for example the provision of free software.

The impact of commercialisation

The debate in plenary sessions and in the workshops on the impact of commercialisation was informed by the need to assert the importance of the academic community and collegiality at institutional, national and global levels, in which the proposed EI Code of Ethics for higher education and research would have an important place (see next section). The powerful assertion of the place of higher education and research as a public good, which is not for sale, and of the rights of students to access to high quality education, are also key elements in the presentation of an alternative and genuine global education. This alternative vision is important to enable the academic community to withstand negative and irrational forces symbolised for example by the “creationists” in the USA, but also more significantly, the political and economic ideologies driving higher education teaching and research towards commercialism. These tendencies undermine academic freedom and promote short term and narrowly instrumental approaches to academic work. Higher education teaching and research are national and international assets, and represent strategic investments in the people, culture and infrastructure of a country. Any operating model based on economic or accounting principles must be resisted. Funding must be the primary responsibility of governments or public agencies.

The widespread dependence of academic appointments and job retention on the ability of staff to attract external funding raises a fundamental issue of academic freedom which the unions must challenge. There is a clear linkage between commercial considerations, short-termism and “dumbing down” in research, and comparable trends in higher education teaching and the awarding of degrees.

Participants were particularly concerned that steps need to be taken to protect education and research in disciplines which do not attract commercial sponsorship particularly the humanities and social sciences. Some protection might be afforded by systematic redistribution of external funding within institutions. Clearly, external sponsorship has its own dangers, and these must be faced with the support of a strong Code of Ethics.

Higher education and research face a major demographic challenge in the next few years with the retirement of a high proportion of academic staff in many countries. It will be important for the continuity of core values, for the unions to actively engage themselves not only with the institutional transitions which will result, but with the renewal of cadres of trade union activists, and with securing the unions’ membership base. Systems facing severe staff shortages must not be allowed to seek solutions either in casualisation or through the recruitment of academic staff from countries which urgently need to build their own academic community. International trade union solidarity is required to head off this latter threat.

The key importance of teachers and institutions of higher education in building the capacity of education systems as a whole, for example through teacher education and educational research and through the promotion of lifelong learning, must be recognised and developed. These are key aspects of higher education's role as a public good, which must be defended against the pressure and constraints of commercialisation

Quality assurance and accreditation are key defences against commercialisation. Institutional and national systems of quality assurance and accreditation must be protected against the encroachment of globalised and commercially driven systems.

The growing tendency for higher education employers to claim the intellectual property rights of their employees must be seen not only as unjust, but as a short sighted policy which together with a lack of support for basic research, will erode the capacity and incentives essential for innovative independent research. EI must challenge the misconception by governments and private funders, that financing “applied” research at the expense of “basic” research is a sustainable policy. Both are needed, and one cannot be played off against the other. EI and its affiliated unions must reassert the place of academic collegiality and trade union solidarity at institutional, national and global levels and promote the common interests of higher education teachers and researchers, and administrative and support staff. (One of the workshops proposed updating of the 1999 Budapest resolution on commercialisation, and their proposed updating amendments will appear as an annex 1 to this report).

EI must continue to assert the importance of academic freedom in higher education and research. However it must develop its position regarding the right of criticism and the challenging of academic findings, which must be subject to agreed processes for rigorous professional scrutiny. This is particularly important in a period when higher education and research are subject to a range of political and economical pressures. The development and implementation of a Code of Ethics which is the property of academic staff, is therefore of great importance and urgency.

In these sessions and throughout the conference, there was a strong sense of the responsibility of EI and its higher education affiliates to address the gap which is still widening between the higher education and research systems in countries of the industrialised world and those in the developing countries. While the experience of the countries in transition, particularly those in central and eastern Europe, may provide some useful suggestions, they have their own ongoing difficulties of adjustment.

The GATS and transnational higher education

The conference discussed the impact of GATS on higher education in the context of papers or presentations by Canadian, Australian, Cote d'Ivoire and United Kingdom unions. The conference heard that governments' apparent complacency about their capacity to protect their own systems if they signed up to GATS was profoundly misplaced: in particular, the definition of a public service was so inadequate that it would expose much apparently public provision to the encroachment of commercial competition under GATS, and the exemptions were very loosely drafted and in any case, only temporary in the protections they afforded.

Against this background, unions were hardly being conservative or ‘Luddite’, as the Australian government had called the Australian union, in opposing GATS. The conference heard of the catastrophic effects of the attempt to meet international agencies’ demands in the Cote d’Ivoire, which had led to the virtual collapse of the public higher education and research system, which had been privatised, with a drastic reduction in quality and a massive loss of student access, against a background of political, social and economic unrest. The UK and European experience linked to the convergence of European higher education systems around the ‘Bachelors, Masters, Doctorate’ pattern which had emerged from the inter-governmental discussions known as the ‘Sorbonne-Bologna process.’ This could now be clearly seen as a response to the emerging global market for higher education which is the purpose of GATS. In discussion, it was pointed out that the diversity of systems within Europe, and their historical roots, were potential advantages in dealing with the crude simplicities of GATS.

The conference heard of the scale of commercial higher education ventures being developed, in which higher education institutions were generally the junior partners of giant media conglomerates, whose businesses were located in countries with the weakest of legal controls and employment rights, and the softest tax and financial regulations. Even the Australian government was now showing some signs of having second thoughts about further opening up its services to the GATS. The experience so far has demonstrated that GATS is not the ‘technical’ process which it has implied, but a deeply political process, the effects of which once it has put in place are largely self-regulating and irreversible. For example, the GATS system itself will judge whether systems’ or institutions’ requirements and limitations on the application of GATS are reasonable.

It was suggested that ensuring that a system’s internal regulations on academic freedom, accreditation and other quality related criteria, are robust, is a key element in fighting the imposition of GATS. National or state control over issues to do with quality can help in keeping GATS at bay. The conference considered other means which could assist in this struggle, including working drafts of a ‘Code of Ethics’ prepared by DM (Denmark) and IFUT (Ireland), and on ‘Guidelines for the transnational provision of higher education’ prepared by NATFHE (UK), both of which had their origins in proposals agreed at the 3rd World Congress of EI in Jomtien in July 2001. The UNESCO recommendation on the status of higher education teaching personnel was potentially another weapon, and the unions at national level need to press their governments to comply with it and use it as a basis for judging GATS proposals. It was also suggested that standards of provision and guarantees of the standing of academic staff should be given a higher profile as negotiating issues, and once embedded in agreements again, should be used as protections against the impact of GATS. The removal of work into private or autonomous commercial units must also be challenged. It was argued that governments and institutions advocating entering the GATS were particularly vulnerable to challenges based on the Quality issue. In many countries, the unions were better informed on the implications of GATS for higher education than either institutional managements or governments, and the unions could take hold of the debate and lead it.

Higher education and research in times of crisis

The conference considered the place of higher education and research in times of crisis, particularly in the context of “ September 11”. It was agreed that the best defence against irrational acts, is the collective application of the intellect and the dialectic in the pursuit of global solutions.

Academics must reject and deconstruct the absolutist stances adopted by political leaders. We are right to insist on the need to analyse and seek to understand apparently unthinkable actions. We are right to resist attempts to simplify the discourse, and to reject right wing caricatures of higher education of part of a ‘problem’ as perceived by politicians and corporate media. Legislative attempts, hastily passed in a crisis, to allow the monitoring of students or the surveillance of the internet are impracticable as well as simply wrong in principle.

Society must subscribe to the principle of academic freedom, which is more important than the often hollow legal protections which often focus on institutional autonomy rather than protecting the individual teacher or researcher. Further, the principle of academic freedom now more than ever must transcend national boundaries. (The conference heard that in the USA, non-citizens at work in American universities are being denied the protections of academic freedom).

Higher education is the key to the international economy and to global cohesion in the 21st century. But the gap between wealth and poverty between countries and regions in many parts of the world is growing. Higher education also has a key part in the struggle to build just societies in which all citizens’ rights are protected, free from all forms of discrimination.

Higher education teachers and researchers are not only citizens in societies in crisis, who must deal with the day-to-day economic, social and political consequences of crisis. The capacity of higher education and research to predict, avert and mitigate the effects of crisis, whether natural, economic or political, must be developed. When crises do occur, the universities have a key role to play in enabling global society to analyse, learn and move forward. This applies in the context of a cataclysm like ‘September 11’ or in tackling the complexities of economic, social and political transition facing the central and eastern European countries since 1990, or in the desperate social and economic conditions created by World Bank requirements in many African or Latin American countries. If research and accumulated knowledge is to meet the potential for protecting people against natural disasters like the Mozambique floods, research institutions and the structures of global civil society must work in closer cooperation, to bring research results quickly to the place they are needed together with the means for countries facing natural disaster to respond effectively.

The universities and the university unions must defend plurality of discourse in society and defend staff against a new ‘culture of fear’ in the face of simplistic social and political – and military – ‘solutions’ stemming from illiberal governments and disseminated by an increasingly concentrated global corporate mass media. Academic freedom must go hand in

hand with the freedom of the press – by which we mean the freedom of journalistic expression - world wide. Finally, higher education – and indeed, education as a whole – has a central responsibility to promote the concept of global citizenship based on shared values and goals, as a key element in the long term process of not only coping with crisis but building a coherent and secure global future. In this, the higher education and research unions have a particular responsibility.

The changing role of the professoriate in post-secondary education

The higher education and research unions have consistently opposed the casualisation of academic staff and the erosion of tenure. However, for most unions in the sector, part-time, casualised and untenured staff make up a significant part of both academic staff and union memberships, but they are not yet adequately integrated.

Their positions are inferior to tenured staff, whether in respect of accumulation of rights to tenure, access to office space, holiday entitlements, or opportunities to undertake research to further their own careers. Casual staff may face different legal, employment and trade union rights from permanent staff. There are often tensions between full time and part-time staff. These are issues unions must urgently address. It is vital for the unions to resist the management “divide and rule” strategies which set permanent and contingent staff in opposition. It is important to recognise the common employment interests of tenured, non-tenured and casualised staff, and the conference favoured common trade union structures and bargaining units for all academic staff. However, the conference acknowledged that for a variety of legal and historical reasons, such an approach may not be favoured or be possible in all countries; in such circumstances, cooperation and coalitions between unions are alternative means of fighting the divide and rule tactics of governments and employers.

Institutions, structures of governance and the management and evaluation of programmes must change to involve all these categories of staff, just as unions must fully represent contingent staff and engage them in their work. Increasingly, the character of academic career patterns also needs to recognise these changes. Engagement of non-tenured and casualised teachers in institutional structures is a key element in fighting “precarity of employment” and the dangers of marginalisation these staff face.

It must be also be recognised that many teachers of professional studies maintain their professional practice and make important links between the academic institution and wider society. The increase of contingent academic workers is creating a more diverse academic population, with differing loyalties and goals. As virtual education develops these trends will increase. The isolation of distance learning staff and the problems of organising them and assuring their rights, are a particular challenge to higher education unions.

Many established academics are engaged in entrepreneurship while retaining tenure. Administrations increasingly turn to contingent staff. In the field of research in particular, there is growing reliance on graduate students. However, many part-timers are putting together academic careers from work in two or more institutions. In the USA at least, a high proportion of part-time staff are relatively satisfied.

Governance

University governance is changing as the higher education system is expanding and diversifying, and as control is decentralised and as universities enter a more competitive market, in which education and research are seen as economic products. How has the relationship between government and the universities changed? Devolution of authority and the pursuit of external funding, has led to a “centrifugal” approach by governments. Stronger institutional managements are challenging the principle of collegiality. For individual academics there has been a loss of freedom-they are more at the mercy of ad-hoc managerial decisions. The past diversity of internal university structures is under threat from pressures to integrate research and to work in project teams

In the face of these trends, quality of teaching and research requires the retention of control by the academics themselves. Research needs the protection of lump-sum public funding of institutions, which must then account for its expenditure. Academics, not politicians or bureaucrats, must take responsibility for funding allocations at national or federal level (eg. the European Union).

The legal status of universities must be reviewed to ensure that they are autonomous, and not over regulated by governments, or on the other hand exposed to undue commercial pressures. The intrusion of a globalised higher education market, is leading to attempted mergers or transfers of departments and faculties to achieve market positioning. The New Zealand experience demonstrates that such commercially led restructuring can be successfully legally challenged.

Representation issues

In the concluding plenary, a number of motions were passed, which appear as annexes to this report, on additional support to deliver the EI programme with respect to higher education and research; the development of Higher Education and research Forums as part of Regional Conferences and immediately prior to the World Congress; the deepening of EI work on teacher education and educational research among EI Higher Education and research affiliates; and endorsing the proposal that the next Higher education conference should be held in an African country. A motion of support for the Spanish higher education and research unions, in fighting an unacceptable new law on higher education was also passed.