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Politics, UNESCO, and Higher Education: A Case Study

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On Wednesday, July 8, 2009, at 5:00 pm (Paris time), the World Conference on Higher Education steering-committee chairperson read the conference’s final communiqué. The entire assembly of 199 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) member countries, approved it by consensus and with acclamations. The chairperson reported that 20 observers followed the drafting committee’s work. Two of these observers are the authors of this article, offering a behind-the-scenes account of the events that occurred before the final communiqué’s presentation. In contrast to the general calm atmosphere predominating during the conference sessions, the drafting process was notable for passionate debates and tense negotiations among members, as they worked to craft the final document.

The 1998 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education agreed on a very relevant final declaration that helped to generate common understandings at the global level on the definition of higher education and the main challenges to be faced by governments and stakeholders. Because of this, we think it is important to detail the content and the “politics of higher education” behind the redaction of the second World Conference on Higher Education’s final communiqué (http://www.unesco.org/en/wche2009/resources/conference-documents/).

Drafting Process

Before the world conference, a series of regional conferences were convened. Each of the regional conferences’ final declarations served as the main input for the final communiqué’s first draft presented to the drafting committee. The committee included 17 UNESCO member states (Germany, France, the United States, Venezuela, India, Brazil, Jamaica, Romania, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Madagascar, RD Congo, Morocco, South Africa, China, Palestine, and Sudan), the chairperson (from Russia), one UNESCO representative, four higher education experts, three stakeholders (International Association of Universities, Education International, and European Students’ Union), two general rapporteurs, and three drafters.

Five meetings, over three days, were scheduled to draft the final document. The first day’s two meetings were spent discussing the drafting committee’s general procedures. On the second day, content discussions began. Two meetings were held that day, the first one at noon and the second one in the evening. The latter started at 7:30 pm and ended after 2 am. Undoubtedly, this was the most intense drafting-process day.

Three Contentious Issues

During the drafting process, most of the political discussion concerned the following issues, although not exclusively.

Defining higher education. The most complicated issue to reach agreement involved defining higher education’s meaning. The first draft stated: “Higher education plays an important role in nation-building. Higher education as a public good must be a matter of responsibility of all governments.” The revised final communiqué states: “Higher education as a public good and a strategic imperative for all levels of education as the basis for research, innovation, and creativity must be a matter of responsibility and economic support of all governments.” Between the first and final drafts, middle-stage iterations included: “Higher education is a social public good and a human right” (3rd draft) to more market-driven conceptions of higher education as a “public service” (5th draft). The Latin American countries strongly advocated the 3rd-draft wording, while the United States was reluctant to accept the use of the “public-good” category. Extended negotiations were necessary to resolve this major disagreement. On the conference’s last day, India’s and Brazil’s representatives negotiated with the United States to accept the use of “public good.” It is unclear exactly what was negotiated, but it may have been the elimination of the paragraph on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), as shown below. For the United States, the use of the adverb “as” was more acceptable than the verb “to be” (higher education is a public good). Even so, the final wording might still be perceived as too problematic for some countries, such as the United States itself, that support higher levels of market intervention in the field.

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GATS and trade in higher education. The GATS debate consumed a lot of time during the drafting process. The first draft stated: “Trade in services is a manifestation of globalization that has caused great concern in the academic community; in particular with GATS under the WTO (World Trade Organization). Member states should not consider higher education as a commercial transaction. . . .” Again, the discussion centered on disagreement between the United States and Latin American countries. The latter pushed for keeping this point in the communiqué, as it could strengthen their position on higher education as a public good. But the United States was opposed to its inclusion, arguing that UNESCO is not the
The Future of International Postsecondary Student Enrollments

Madeleine F. Green and Kimberly Koch

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, there were an estimated 2.8 million internationally mobile students worldwide, up from 1.8 million in 1999. UNESCO defines an international student as one who crossed his or her national border to pursue an education and excludes students who are in a program for less than one year.

Governments and higher education institutions support the recruitment and enrollment of international students for a variety of reasons, including income generation, cultural diplomacy, promoting innovation and productivity by gaining access to talent, and promoting campus internationalization. Although the number of students seeking education abroad is growing and is likely to continue doing so, the competition for international students is fierce.

We examine international student enrollments in postsecondary education in the top-five receiving countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia—summarizing the efforts of these nations to attract these students and the factors that will influence future trends.