



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr David Atchoarena,
Director of the UNESCO Division for Planning and
Development of Education Systems,
on the occasion of the Sixth Meeting of Spanish UNESCO Chairs**

Barcelona (Spain), 9-10 February 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the organizers, notably the Spanish National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO, for their invitation.

As an introduction, I wish to stress the importance of Higher Education for UNESCO. In the complex situation that UNESCO is now facing, Higher Education remains an important component of our work, and the cooperation with networks, in particular UNESCO Chairs, is even more significant. My participation in this meeting provides an opportunity to emphasize the importance of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme in general and more specifically the cooperation with UNESCO Chairs established in Spain.

The UNITWIN Programme and UNESCO Chairs were launched in 1991 as a response to stop the decline of higher education institutions in developing countries, in particular in the least developed countries.

The objectives then were to:

- reinforce inter university cooperation,
- facilitate knowledge sharing and transfer,
- promote academic solidarity,
- support the emergence of centres of excellence in developing countries, and
- control brain drain.

The Programme has grown steadily from 25 UNESCO Chairs established in 1992, to 725 Chairs at the end of 2011 covering all UNESCO's regions and areas of expertise.

More than 20 years later, we see that these goals are still relevant, not only for developing countries.

Over the years, the directions of the UNITWIN Programme evolved and it was given a dual mandate:

- developing a "think tank" capacity;
- building bridges between universities and society.

Worldwide, the financial crisis is creating challenges for higher education and the linkages between universities and society. This problematic is particularly acute in Europe where governments have to review strategic and sensitive trade-offs:

- between access and quality;
- between effectiveness and equity.

In some countries austerity measures are sometimes perceived as threatening the autonomy of universities. The structure of the higher education sector may eventually be reshaped as a result of these new economic conditions.

The employment of university graduates which was already an important policy concern for governments and for higher education institutions, will be even higher on the reform agenda, in particular in countries facing massive youth unemployment.

These challenges are now part of the broader landscape of the UNITWIN Programme.

As Professor Antoni Giró stated this morning in his opening remarks, "Universities are not part of the problem, they are part of the solution". UNESCO fully endorses this statement.

The new challenges facing the higher education sector result in a growing importance of the linkages between universities and society. This context has strong implications for teaching, for research and also for the broader services extended to society at large. It is our belief that the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme can further contribute to the emergence of knowledge societies and to achieving lifelong learning for all.

The Programme aims to be pertinent, forward-thinking and to impact socio-economic development effectively. UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Network projects have proven useful in establishing new teaching programmes, generating new ideas through research and reflection, and facilitating the enrichment of existing university programmes while respecting cultural diversity.

Chairs and Networks work on issues high on the global agenda, ranging from literacy to the preservation of linguistic diversity; sustainable development; human rights and democracy; innovation in science and technology for development; migrations; bioethics; intercultural dialogue; cultural tangible and intangible heritage; freedom of expression; conflict resolution, etc.

In higher education, UNESCO Chairs provide valuable input to the policy debates, including examples of good innovative practices to widen access to quality higher education; to enhance the relevance of programmes and increase graduates' employability; to strengthen inter-regional and inter-institutional networking. GUNi, "una red de redes", provides a good sense of the potential of UNITWIN Network and UNESCO Chairs to contribute to inter-university cooperation at the international level.

The diversity of UNESCO Chairs in Spain, perfectly reflects the deep engagement of Spanish universities in promoting and reinforcing the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme. This richness also illustrates the contribution of the network to addressing emerging societal challenges.

I am sure that many of the participants in this room would argue that Chairs and Networks fully play their role as contributing to new knowledge, freely shared with others in a true spirit of academic solidarity. Your work is clearly relevant to the society and to the international community.

Spain is one of the countries with the highest number of UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks. Of course, quality is not always to be found in numbers, but let me say our appreciation of the work of the over 75 UNESCO Chairs and Networks established within Spanish institutions. Their programmes focus on themes closely related to UNESCO's own priorities and through their diverse activities, the Spanish Chairs are very relevant to the MDGs.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to reaffirm the importance of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme for building capacities of higher education and research institutions, enhancing knowledge creation and sharing, and strengthening international inter-university cooperation.

We are looking at ways and means to enhance the Programme's overall relevance and strengthen the partnership among the UNESCO Chairs, and with UNESCO. UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks should become a key mechanism for the implementation of UNESCO's priority programmes. Moreover, in the field of education, we will further strengthen our cooperation with higher education institutions worldwide in the implementation of UNESCO's programmes.

We should like to thank the Spanish National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO for the strong and lasting support to the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme and we are looking forward to future cooperation with the Commission and with Spanish Universities towards further promoting and strengthening the programme.

Thank you for your attention.

*
**