

UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE)
Paris
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TRIP REPORT
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With the support of Carleton University, I attended the 2009 WCHE on behalf of the university and in my capacity as Chair of the Network Community-based Research Canada (CBRC). In my latter capacity, I was participating in a panel session at the conference organized by the Global Alliance for Community-engaged Research (GACER).

The work of the conference began on the afternoon of Sunday, July 5th with a meeting of the Canadian delegation. The Head of the delegation was John Malloy, Minister of Colleges and Universities and Research and Innovation (Ontario). There was also representation from AUCC, CAUT, CFS and ample representation from Quebec universities and academic organizations. We were briefed by the Executive Director of the Canadian delegation at UNESCO and by her Quebec counterpart. They advised that a main feature of the conference and the negotiations related to the final communiqué would relate to Africa. The Sunday meeting was followed by the official opening of the conference.

July 6th was the full day of proceedings. It consisted of a series of plenary sessions.

The first focused on the results of the six regional preparatory conferences. Noteworthy was the fact that the south Asia region focused on social responsibility and higher education and on the importance of community-based research. Inter-disciplinarity was described as a key to knowledge advancement. Both the Latin American/Caribbean and African presentations focused on the development of academic networks within their respective regions. The junior Minister of Education for India presented on behalf of the Southwest and South central regional meeting. Her presentation amounted to little more than an infomercial for Indian PSE, plus political statements in support of African nations and critical of “the Bretton Woods countries.”

The second plenary was on trends in global higher education. The lead speaker was from the centre for Higher Education I the USA. He referred to the dominance of the American paradigm in global PSE. Subsequent speakers dealt with the three themes of the WCHE: Internationalization, regionalization and globalization; equity, access and quality; and learning, research and innovation. The best presentation by far was that of Sir John Daniel, President & CEO of Commonwealth of Learning. He spoke of the “iron triangle” of PSE -- the demand for Access (higher), Quality (higher) and costs (lower). He argued that, until recently, this triangle was equilateral and immutable. You couldn’t make a move on one dimension without (adversely) affecting the others. He argued that this was now changing because of the advent of

open educational resources (OERs), which he thinks have the power to increase access and quality without increasing cost.

The final plenary was on higher education in Africa. It had a large and wide range of participants from the Prime Minister of Namibia, to the Chair of the Council of Ministers of Education of Africa (the Minister of Higher Education in South Africa), to a representative of the African Development Bank. Most interesting was an apparent difference in view between the Prime Minister and the Chair of the African CME. The former advocated a strategy of building on existing knowledge and applying it in the African context. The latter warned of the dangers of ignoring African indigenous knowledge and the overwhelming dominance of western knowledge paradigms. The representative of the ADB was the only female on this panel of eleven people. Given the focus on Africa, it is important to note that there was scant reference to gender and higher education. The two people who did refer to differential access and gender issues were the Chair of the CME and the representative of the ADB. The Deputy Minister of Academic Research Policy in the Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology spoke about lessons from South Korea for Africa and there was reference to the willingness of South Korea and China to help African nations deal with their higher education challenges.

The second day of the WCHE began with another plenary on the Social Responsibility of Higher Education. This was another broadly conceived panel, but this time only with a keynote and five speakers. In this context, “social responsibility” was conceived largely as meeting the challenge of access to higher education. The former President of Australian National University and Chair of the 2007 Advisory Panel on Higher Education in Australia spoke of the challenge of access in her country, especially for lower SE groups and people from rural/remote areas. The Mexican Minister of Higher Education saw access issues from the framework of viewing PSE as a public rather than a private good. The President of the College of the Bahamas was an advocate of rankings and awards for SR in Higher Education and argued that universities and colleges had an obligation to provide support and increase shared understanding by offering more opportunities for exchanges among students, faculty and staff. The most interesting presentation was by the Director of the Africa centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Bradford. This Centre is currently heavily involved in Sierra Leone. He argued that universities have a social responsibility to assist in the transition to peace and post-conflict stability. In his view, universities, particularly African universities, have not yet recognized their role in this regard. He made a proposal for a new African Peace University, specifically with this mission. This proposal received a lot of comment in the plenary dialogue that accompanied this session. This was the first real opportunity for dialogue at the conference.

The remainder of Day 2 was devoted to parallel sessions on each of the three conference themes. I attended a session on the Contribution of Higher Education, Research and Innovation Systems to a Sustainable Future. (Minister Milloy also attended part of this session.) The panel presentations were, once again, very

diverse. They ranged from a plea for new paradigms of research (inter-, trans-disciplinary) to an effort to count the impact of science and engineering research in Chile, Argentina and Brazil by looking at the number and “cost” of publications.

The afternoon was devoted to the Global Alliance for Community-Engaged Research (GACER) panel on “University-Community Engagement (CUE) for Societal Change and Development: Possibilities and Challenges” (my panel). Considering our placement in the program – after lunch on Day 2 and the fact that the President of Brazil was making a “surprise” speech at the conference in the same timeslot, we did reasonably well in terms of attendance. The session was an interactive one, focusing on five questions:

1. What do you understand re: CUE?
2. Why is CU important in terms of the themes of the WCHE?
3. What challenges do we face in developing/growing CU engagement?
4. Are there any emergent efforts or evidence of success from our own contexts to share with others?
5. What would we recommend in order to realize in order to realize the emergence of CU engagement more widely?

The full substance of the discussion was captured by a rapporteur. I had the opportunity to talk about the development of the CURA initiative in Canada and its impact on fostering a learning community on CU engagement, including the establishment of Community-based Research Canada. This was described by the session Chair (Rajesh Tandon of India) as “good practice.” The session concluded with an acknowledgement that most of those attending were already among “the converted.” The common challenge is to expand awareness of and support for CU engagement within universities, governments and other funders.

Beyond the panel itself, GACAER participants had made a real effort to create broader awareness of the organization and its aims, objects and recommendations to WCHE. The GACER Brief was distributed as widely as possible. Panel members attended (legitimately) the first working meeting of the drafters of the final WCHE Communiqué. However, this proved futile as the drafting meeting got completely bogged down in procedural wrangling among the delegates. The issue was the proposal for an English-only communiqué. La Francophonie was upset.

Day 2 concluded with a special event panel, “Higher Education at a Time of Transformation – Moving Towards New Social Leadership.” This panel was organized by the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) as part of the launch of its report “Higher Education at a Time of Transformation: New Dynamics for Social Responsibility.” Rajesh Tandon of GACER was one of the three panelists along with a former Executive Director of UNESCO Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (from Brazil) and Carl Lindberg, a member of the UN High Level Panel for the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development and former Minister of Education and Science in Sweden. Once again, the presentations were wide-ranging. The Brazilian panelist seemed preoccupied with the role of the

university in creating collective awareness and a sense of social responsibility that would keep rampant capitalism in check. Tandon argued for a model of social learning that was based on collaborative learning among all sectors of society (“Let’s take the ‘higher’ out of Higher Education and realize that all sectors have something to offer in the learning and problem solving process.”) He also argued for problem-focused “transdisciplinary” research. Lindberg played a somewhat lesser role, given the two very strong personalities that were his co-panelists.

The third day of the WCHE was devoted largely to meetings of specific stakeholders and the closing session with adoption of the final communiqué. The final communiqué can be found at:

www.unesco.org/education/hed/2009-worldconference

Despite the heroic efforts of our GACER and GUNI colleagues, efforts to have language inserted into the communiqué about the social and community responsibilities of universities were unsuccessful. The communiqué seems to have been a set piece from the start. Nonetheless, these issues did get airtime.

Concluding Observations

It was worthwhile to attend the WCHE for several reasons:

1. CBRC was able to participate in GACER’s effort to raise the profile of CUE internationally.
2. Canadian practice was the subject of attention.
3. Personal networks and contacts that can potentially assist CBRC in the future were fostered through participation and interaction with other Canadian delegates. (In this context, note that Karen McBride is leaving AUCC to become President of CBIE.)
4. International networks were fostered – especially with GACER and GUNI. (Note that Peter Taylor will shortly be leaving IDS at Sussex and joining IDRC in Ottawa.)

As an aside, the conference organization was noteworthy. Logistics (especially registration) were chaotic at times. The plenaries tended to have too many set speakers and were very static in most cases. While no one used acetates, the technology associated with the conference could hardly be called “advanced.” But still, it was a show.

Postscript CBRC

I had a reasonably long conversation with Elizabeth Barot, Program Director, Canadian Commission for UNESCO following our panel. She suggested that we think carefully about the language we use to describe “community-based research.” Without suggesting specifics, she thinks that different funders may be responsive to different terminologies. This is something we should pursue with her in Ottawa.

K. Graham
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