

Implications of WTO/GATS on Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific
Seoul, Republic of Korea
27-29 April 2005

RECOMMENDATIONS ON FUTURE ACTION

Preamble

The *UNESCO Division of Higher Education* (represented by the Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge and by the Section for Reform, Innovation and Quality Assurance) and the *Korean National Commission for UNESCO* have taken the initiative, in cooperation with the *Korean Educational Development Institute* and the *Korean Council for University Education*, to organize a Regional Seminar on the Implications of WTO/GATS on Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific (27 – 29 April 2005 in Seoul, Republic of Korea).

The socio-economic changes in the region and the developing information and knowledge society have emphasized the importance of higher education and research in the Asia-Pacific region. Also, the countries in the region are confronted with the challenges of international trade and cross-border provision of higher education. With the liberalization of the higher education sector, the role of higher education in the future societal, cultural and economic development of the region has become an important issue. Moreover, the question of education as a public responsibility has become a relevant topic.

With these considerations in mind, it is imperative to emphasize the purpose of the Seminar on the Implications of WTO/GATS on Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific.

This is to identify the implications of WTO/GATS for higher education and research on the one side, and policy developments on the other; and also to share experiences among countries and regions that are exceptionally diverse and to reaffirm the importance of cooperation between all major stakeholders through the Recommendations below. We should like to recall that along with WTO/GATS, there are other trade agreements that are developed at the subregional, regional, bilateral and multilateral level, of which some may include the education sector. It should be noted that the following Recommendations also concern the above-mentioned agreements.

We, the participants of the UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Implications of WTO/GATS in Asia and the Pacific,

Recalling

- The UNESCO Constitution, which encourages institutional exchanges in the area of education;
- The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), which states in article 26, paragraph 1, that “Everyone has the right to education” and that “Higher Education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit”;
- The Declaration on Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific from the Regional Conference on Higher Education: National Strategies and Regional Co-operation for the 21st Century (1997), which states in article 10 that “there is an urgent need to develop a plan of action and accompanying guidelines for co-operation”;

- The World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century (1998), which states that “Higher education should be considered as a public role”. Furthermore, the declaration affirms the role of higher education in the “consolidation of human rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace, in a context of justice”, and that “international co-operation and exchange are major avenues for advancing higher education throughout the world”.

Noting that the liberalization of the education sector and the consequent changes in regulations question the role of the State and the notion of higher education as a public good in an area traditionally considered as part of government sovereignty;

Observing that Member States should, while negotiating, have in mind the possible consequences that the liberalization of the education sector may have at a national level and therefore exercise caution on further commitments on GATS and other trade agreements;

We, the participants of the UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Implications of WTO/GATS in Asia and the Pacific, recommend that:

- Governments reinforce the local capacity of higher education and research, and facilitate the widest possible access of disadvantaged students to higher education;
- Governments develop a clear and transparent policy with regard to the liberalization of the education sector, through cooperation and coordination between Education and Trade Ministries, and take into account the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines, as the new rules negotiated under GATS and other trade agreements challenge both existing traditional ways of delivering education and public funding of higher education at national level;
- Governments ensure that discussions on the implications of GATS and other trade agreements on higher education and research take place between educational stakeholders and within educational networks as well as with representatives and stakeholders from the trade sector;
- Research is conducted on the specific regional implications that GATS and other trade agreements could have on the provision of education in Asia and the Pacific. This research must be conducted bearing in mind the considerable diversity of the countries in the region (religion, culture, gender, ethnicity and education) and the different expectations that these countries may have from negotiations on the liberalization of the education sector. Through research on GATS and other trade agreements and higher education in the Asia-Pacific region, there is an opportunity to widen the understanding of the potential threats and/or opportunities from the liberalization of the education sector, such as questions related to national financing models, distance education and diversification of programme offers;
- Governments carefully consider how to maintain and ensure the independence and quality of research and education, as well as the balance in both basic and applied research, relative to the implications of the GATS and other trade agreements;
- Governments use research results as a basis for policy developments and regulatory frameworks, not only for the education sector but also for related sectors such as science and technology, culture, trade and immigration.

Observing that the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions plays an important role in securing academic freedom, i.e. teaching without any interference, the freedom to carry out research, to disseminate and to publish the results of research;

Indicating that each higher education institution should find a balance between maintaining its autonomy and responding to the demands of the stakeholders, including the society in general;

Recognising the need for creating awareness and preparedness on the possible implications and opportunities arising from the liberalization of the education sector;

We, the participants of the UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Implications of WTO/GATS in Asia and the Pacific, recommend that:

- The balance between basic and applied research should be maintained, because of the fundamental role of research in providing expertise for economic and social development. Furthermore, research plays an important role in scientific discoveries as well as in broadening our knowledge of society;
- Institutional autonomy should be accompanied by a high level of responsibility and accountability: providers should guarantee transparency over the new teaching and delivery methods proposed, as well as over the costs of education, and cooperate with both quality assurance and accreditation agencies and professional associations for the recognition of qualifications, assurance of quality and relevance of courses;
- Institutions encourage international cooperation between providers of education with regard to both teaching and research.

Noting that increased cross-border education promotes the possibility for innovation in teaching and delivery methods;

Recognising that increased cross-border education is an irreversible trend that promotes a higher mobility of students, programmes and providers, and therefore raises the issue of how new courses and degrees will be recognised at national and international levels;

We, the participants of the UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Implications of WTO/GATS in Asia and the Pacific, recommend that:

- Quality assurance and accreditation arrangements which include cross-border education provision are established;
- Common regional standards of the recognition of degrees, especially those offered by cross-border providers, should be further developed through the UNESCO Convention for the Recognition of Studies in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific in close cooperation with quality assurance and accreditation agencies, while preserving the national specificities of the countries;
- Cooperation between the different national information bodies on qualification recognition and quality assurance should be enhanced in order to facilitate the possibility for students to have access to information tools that help them to make adequate choices for quality higher education and will offer recognized qualifications and diplomas.

Observing that professional associations will be approached by graduate students who hold degrees from public and private institutions both domestic and foreign;

Recognising the importance of cooperation between higher education institutions and the non-educational sectors, e.g. labour, health and science and technology, in order to ensure that the new study programs, disciplines and specializations meet the needs of the workplace. Cooperation between the educational and the economic and social sectors should also take into consideration how to benefit from the knowledge and competencies provided by existing study programs, disciplines and specializations;

We, the participants of the UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Implications of WTO/GATS in Asia and the Pacific, recommend that:

- Professional associations cooperate with higher education institutions in order to ensure the relevance of the new study programs to the needs of the workplace and society;
- These associations cooperate closely with recognition bodies as well as quality assurance and accreditation agencies in the establishment of common regional standards of recognition of qualifications.

Indicating the growing demand of higher education in many countries in Asia and the Pacific;

Noting that the diversification of higher education institutions may, due to new teaching and delivery modes, increase student access to graduate programs, especially of disadvantaged groups;

We, the participants of the UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Implications of WTO/GATS in Asia and the Pacific, recommend that:

- Students and student associations should have access to detailed information on the content, relevance, quality and costs of any study programme offered;
- Student associations should facilitate the dissemination of such information;
- Information regarding the different sources of financing (national and private) should also be made available;
- Students should have the opportunity to express their opinions, based on the aforementioned information, in relation to institutional decision-making.

Bearing in mind UNESCO's mission, which is to encourage institutional exchanges in the area of education, particularly by reinforcing higher education programs in Asia and the Pacific through cooperation between UNESCO Headquarters and regional and field offices in Asia and the Pacific and specialised agencies;

We, the participants of the UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Implications of WTO/GATS in Asia and the Pacific, acknowledge the role of UNESCO, which is among others:

- to carry out studies, analyses, projects and research activities supporting the elaboration of public policies and other initiatives related to higher education in the region;
- to support capacity building with regard to quality assurance and information sharing and enhanced professional development of personnel for governments and higher education institutions;
- to provide a platform for discussing issues, long-term challenges and opportunities related to higher education;
- to support the work of research groups and of the academic community in the field of higher education in Asia and the Pacific, and to promote policy developments on the basis of these research findings.