

Round Table Discussion on Education

Introduction:

In collaboration with the Mexico and Inter-American Division (LMR) of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development organized a one-day discussion on September 25, 1997, on education in the Americas. Participants included the Council of Ministers of Education, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, The Association of Universities and Colleges, the Canadian Bureau of International Education and Centrale de l'Enseignement du Québec. As education will be one of four themes discussed at the second Summit of the Americas in April, 1998, (Santiago, Chile), participants were invited to provide their comments on a draft Education Action Plan. The following is a summary of the main issues discussed by participants.

Basic Themes:

Education is facing the double challenge of adequately preparing individuals to compete in the global knowledge-based economy while becoming increasingly mindful of local cultural identities and realities. In this context, education must seek a balance between pure utilitarianism and humanistic values. Education programs that focus solely on what people need to have in order to compete internationally can undermine local cultural identities and local life. Education and training programs should not only exist to equip individuals to become workers in the factories of first world companies. To ignore this principle of cultural identities and realities would constitute a disservice to those education is supposed to benefit in the first place, and in the long run, to countries advocating such an approach.

The Action Plan must clearly distinguish means from ends. Distance education, the application of new technologies, and student and educator exchanges are all tools that can be used to strengthen educational institutions (or to achieve other objectives) and they can thus improve the quality of education. They can be considered an objective in their own right when, for example, they serve to support the greater goal - to bring knowledge to people. The draft Action Plan should outline common objectives and list the means that countries could use to attain those objectives (some means could presumably be used to attain many objectives).

Canada believes that all societies can benefit from increased international cooperation in education. Not only can a society provide assistance and sometimes solutions to others but it can also, in return, enrich itself through the internationalization of its own education systems. As Education is an area of provincial jurisdiction, any further development of a Canadian policy on education in the Americas should be undertaken in consultation with the provinces.

Quality:

In order to strengthen the quality of education, the mobility of knowledge is as important, if not more important, than merely the mobility of people. Moving people can be very expensive and certain groups of people, such as women are often restricted in their ability to move.

While basic education is important, secondary and post-secondary education is equally vital if the countries of the hemisphere are to compete in and reap the benefits of their participation in the international marketplace.

Therefore, any action plan should call for enhanced development across the whole gamut of education levels.