

Round Table Discussion on Education

Introduction:

In collaboration with the Mexico and North American Countries Council 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 Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. As education will be one of four themes discussed at the second Summit of the Americas in April 1998, participants were invited to provide their thoughts on a draft Education Action Plan. The following is a summary of the main issues discussed by participants.

Basic Themes:

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS ON EDUCATION

Education is facing the double challenge of preparing citizens to compete in the global knowledge-based economy while maintaining national and cultural identities and values. In this context, education must seek a balance between pure utilitarian and academic values. Education programs that focus solely on what people need to know to enter a changing marketplace are undermining local cultural identities and local life. Education and training programs should not only seek to equip individuals to become workers in the factories of first world companies. To ignore this principle of cultural identities and values 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 should use to attain those objectives (these means would presumably be used to attain those objectives).

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

Conclusions:

In order to strengthen the quality of education, the mobility of knowledge is as important as the mobility of people. Moving people can be very expensive and often restricted in their ability to move. A basic education is important, necessary and not enough. The challenge is to ensure that the benefits of their education are to the greatest extent possible. Therefore, any action plan should call for enhanced development of education systems.

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