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Securing the Future for International Education: Managing Growth and Diversity

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Addressing the Gender Divide

I am very pleased to be here and thank IDP for inviting me to both the Global Leaders Forum and to the 17th IDP Australian International Education Conference on “Securing the Future for International Education: Managing Growth and Diversity.

I am also happy to see the topic of the Gender Divide on the conference agenda. The gender divide is alive and well still in many sectors including ours, namely higher education. This session allows me to talk briefly about a recent conference my Association, the International Association of Universities (IAU) co-organised with the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP) in Monterrey Mexico on the topic of “*Women and Leadership in Higher Education*”. We were asking the question – How Thick is the Glass Ceiling?

Here let me again thank IDP and Lindy Hind for being one of the sponsors for the conference, even though she herself could not join us in Mexico.

In the next few minutes let me share with you the highlights from this conference. I will not bother to explain why it is important for us to make our way through the glass ceiling, but rather will focus on what the 150 or so participants, from every region of the world, had to say about how to do it, and what stands in the way.

It is worth noting that not only was this event a first joint conference ever organised by two associations. It was also the first time that either of the two associations looked at this subject

at a major gathering. The reason for this might be that for the first time in their combined 90 year-old history, IAUP has a woman President and IAU has a woman as Secretary-General.

The conference in Monterrey was a great meeting, but it failed in one significant way – despite all of our efforts to ensure otherwise, it was a meeting almost exclusively of women. Since the gender divide cannot be removed, nor can women’s role in society improve more generally without the full participation of men, it was disappointing that only a few men took part.

We had several objectives, but among the key ones were:

- To examine the extent to which full and equitable participation of women in higher education is a reality today in various regions; in other words to take stock of the situation;
- To facilitate dialogue and exchange of ideas among leaders in higher education to improve the situation;
- To share information and assess policies and incentives which have been successful.

Ultimately we wanted to have ammunition call upon national, regional and international university organisations and higher education institutions to remove obstacles that stand in women’s way in teaching, research and senior management. Also, the aim was to find ways to call upon governments to legislate for equal opportunity and demand accountability from universities on the implementation of such policies.

So where do we stand on the issue of women in leadership positions in higher education institutions in 2003?

- There is no single country in the world where women play an equal role with men in higher education leadership, even when leadership is defined relatively broadly as senior administrative positions;
- Australia is among the success stories, with 10 women out of a total of 37 Vice-Chancellors in public universities. In the US in 2001, only 21% of the university

Presidents were women; in Thailand, of the 119 universities and colleges and institutions only 21, so less than one fifth, are women at the moment.

The somewhat encouraging aspect of these rather low numbers is that women head up the full spectrum of universities – large, small, research-intensive and technological institutions alike. But most progress, even in the highly industrialised countries, has really been achieved only in the past 5-7 years.

On the less positive side, for many of the delegates from Africa, Russia, Asia and the Middle East, these still very low numbers, remain but a glimmer in the distant future.

As one delegate put it, women's feet are firmly stuck to the higher education floor, let alone reaching the ceiling. When they do reach it, it remains thick enough to hurt your head when you bump up against it (I. Moses, President of IAUP).

So there has been progress, most participants acknowledged, but it has been very slow. In fact in the US, the pace of change is so slow that it would take another 50 years to reach parity with men in leadership positions in universities in that country if the pace remains as is.

Among the positive signs, it was noted that as students, **women often outnumber men** or come close to parity overall. Even if important differences remain with regard to disciplines and level of study, this trend appears to be global. At the same time, **in every region of the world, the higher up in the institutional hierarchy one goes, the fewer the women, whether as students, faculty or as academic and administrative leaders.**

Again, on the positive side, participants noted that often the policy frameworks to promote gender equity and equal opportunities were in place in most countries. These include gender equity action plans at governmental and institutional levels. But even in a context where the policy environment maybe enabling for women, there is strong proof that policies without supports, monitoring and incentives and without a real cultural change (a change in the mindset) will not affect real transformation.

Interestingly enough, the obstacles and barriers still in place were very similar across all regions of the world, even though their intensity and deep-rootedness varied.

Three main categories of obstacles emerged from the presentations and discussions. First, there remain many **cultural obstacles** - attitudes, mindset, stereotypes – in society, in business in higher education, among men and women. Second, there are **systemic obstacles** – lack of critical mass of women to take up leadership positions, low numbers in doctoral level graduates and a resulting small pool of women reaching levels required to access leadership posts; marginalisation, biases in evaluation criteria and promotion practices, basic male centeredness of universities and related scientific bodies (ex. academies of science). Finally there are also **personal obstacles** – balancing family and professional life and life cycle issues for women.

In our debates, what was needed to remove these obstacles often allowed some participants to share what already existed in their countries. It was in this regard that the differences between countries were perhaps most stark. In other words the distribution of success stories is very **uneven around the globe!**

There was a general consensus that bridging the gender divide and breaking the ceiling requires a concerted effort that combines government level policy, legislation and budgets with institutional level programmes, initiatives, monitoring and awareness-raising campaigns. Also, it was noted that in most countries and internationally, much more research and analysis was necessary to support advocacy. Furthermore, representatives from countries that had already enacted legislation for equal opportunity, strongly insisted that such laws work only if accompanied by budgets, incentives and sanctions for non compliance. Monitoring and institutional accountability measures were also needed, among these, for example, the necessity to report publicly was found to create pressure to comply.

To encourage more women to seek out positions of leadership, gender issues and women as role models needed to be given far more visibility. This would also help change stereotypes. Even the best women academics are not necessarily ready or able to take up leadership positions and for this reason, it was generally agreed that women also need a variety of

supports for leadership development. Mentoring, skills training, confidence building and other kinds of support infrastructures needed to be in place. In addition, in light of the isolation and lack of critical mass of women leaders, networks are needed and can often provide much valued external support for institutional change.

A key strategic question that the participants debated at length was how to ensure that gender equity or addressing the gender divide was not seen as a woman's issue, but rather a higher education issue. It would be very interesting to link the issue of gender to some of the statistical data that IDP is presenting about future demand and supply in international education. The recognition of the aging population in industrialised countries and the shortages of both students and faculty expected in these countries may have a specific impact on women.

When discussing strategies, building alliances with media, with business, with women in politics and in other sectors was seen as an effective way to support change. Men were part of these alliance-building efforts too, since a strong champion, whether man or woman could play a very important, at times, decisive role. Finally, several representatives also urged us to protect gains already made. Concern was expressed in particular about the spectre of regression on policies such as affirmative action.

All the strategies and mechanisms that participants shared with each other also called for far better data. We must be able to tell the story with facts and figures and these remain rare and spotty. I would applaud the Association of Commonwealth Universities, which has just recently updated their statistical analysis entitled **Still a Single Sex Profession**, first published in 1998. Such information needs to be maintained and expanded to provide policy makers and advocates alike with comprehensive and comparative statistics on gender, including leadership in higher education.

It will take some time still before higher education institutions will welcome women into leadership positions on a par with men. We must start building confidence in girls and young women early, and make the case throughout their schooling in order to succeed. And, whatever successes we achieve, we must find means to share the good practices and lessons learned throughout the academic community.

IAU and IAUP agreed to link all the participants electronically so that they could maintain contact and pursue follow-up actions. Our hosts in Mexico are expected to produce a CD Rom with all the papers.