

**Remarks by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC,
at the luncheon-meeting between the President of Harvard
University and the Presidents of Chilean Universities**

1. Welcome and introductions (10 minutes, including self-introductions by over 20 participants)

Good afternoon.

I am pleased to welcome you all to ECLAC, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the regional outpost of the United Nations.

We are particularly honoured to welcome President Drew Faust and her colleagues from Harvard University, as well as our distinguished friends, the Presidents of the Chilean Universities.

As an institution devoted to applied research in a wide range of fields related to the sustainable economic and social development of Latin America and the Caribbean with a view to producing public policy proposals, we are well aware that education and, in particular, higher education play an essential role in development.

This is why we are so delighted to be able to host this luncheon-meeting to exchange ideas on the future of higher education and how it could better contribute to preparing future professionals and leaders for the demands of our societies two or more decades down the road.

Since I am aware that there are some time constraints owing to the many activities taking place in town today, I would like to invite you all to introduce ourselves before we begin the presentations.

My name is Alicia Barcena. I am Mexican and currently the Executive Secretary of ECLAC, before which I was Chef de Cabinet of Kofi Annan and Under-Secretary-General for Management with Ban Ki-moon.

Invite participants to introduce themselves, beginning with the other members of Harvard University's delegation.

Once all the participants have introduced themselves, Ms. Barcena introduces President Faust and makes some brief remarks about ECLAC research and policy proposals regarding higher education.

2. Introducing President Faust and ECLAC views on higher education (5 minutes)

Thank you very much. Please do begin with your lunch.

Now that we all know each other, let me tell you that as Executive Secretary of ECLAC and as a Mason Fellow of the John F. Kennedy School of Government, class of 1987, I am truly honoured and privileged to introduce Dr. Drew Faust, the twenty-eighth President of Harvard University and the Lincoln Professor of History in Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

In reviewing President Faust's biography I found a great many interesting aspects to highlight, but I would like to draw attention to just a few of them, which I believe are of particular relevance to our discussions today.

We share a key feature of our lives: Drew is the first woman President of Harvard and I am the first woman heading the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

During a press conference held on campus in 2007 Faust stated, *"I hope that my own appointment can be one symbol of an opening of opportunities that would have been inconceivable even a generation ago"*. She also added, *"I'm not the woman president of Harvard, I'm the president of Harvard."*

She has broadened the University's international reach, embraced sustainability and promoted collaboration across academic disciplines and administrative units while guiding the University through a period of significant substantive and financial challenges. At the same time, she has expanded financial aid to improve access to Harvard College for students of all economic backgrounds and advocated increased federal funding for scientific research. She has taken a firm decision to work with disadvantaged students.

President Faust,

You champion public service over private gain and this is precisely what this institution is doing in support of governments and people of this region.

In close consonance with your advocacy, ECLAC has worked to ensure that the broadest possible spectrum of views is represented in all of our research, training and technical

assistance. So what Harvard is aiming for—to ensure students are prepared to examine those diverse viewpoints with the best possible intellectual training—is exactly what we believe is needed to rise to these epochal changes humanity is facing. To face the challenges of climate change and green economy, natural disasters and adaptation, economic growth with equality, to name but a few.

Allow me to say that in ECLAC you will find the most enthusiastic partner in Latin America and the Caribbean for your call for universities to, and I quote, “*nurture the hopes of the world: in solving challenges that cross borders; in unlocking and harnessing new knowledge; in building cultural and political understanding; and in modeling environments that promote dialogue and debate*” (Address to the Royal Irish Academy, June 30, 2010).

ECLAC has closely followed developments in the level of educational achievements that effectively reduce vulnerability vis-à-vis poverty and social exclusion. One of the main challenges facing higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean is that the level of knowledge required to be an active citizen in the knowledge society is rising constantly and ever faster.

Since at least the industrial revolution we had been accustomed to gradually rising educational thresholds being required to achieve increasing living standards. However, the pace at which these changes are now occurring is creating complex difficulties of synchronization for higher education.

Our region faces an additional challenge arising from the low proportion of young people who manage to conclude higher education. Only 8.3% of people between 25-29 years have completed five years of higher education —equivalent to a first degree in most universities here.

To a large extent, this derives from the uneven level of competencies achieved in primary and secondary education, which is directly related to the very unequal income distribution prevailing in the region. Indeed for every 27 young people from the richest 10% who complete five years of higher education, only 1 person from the poorest 10% is able to do the same.

While higher education in the region has increased significantly in recent decades, its coverage is still very limited and concentrated in the middle and upper sectors of societies. This has social and economic implications, since the lack of a critical mass of qualified young technicians and professionals greatly constrains modernization processes and productivity gains.

Therefore, it seems to us that higher education must continue to expand, but must at the same time afford due attention to equity in access, without compromising on course quality.

These reflections are deeply rooted in ECLAC tradition, in which equity plays a central role. Our approach to education is aimed at closing gaps in educational achievement. We are, of course, well aware of other, concurrent challenges concerning the need to change the way young people learn and the relevant knowledge contents they need to perform in a fast-changing world in which knowledge is produced in very novel ways and at a breathtaking pace.

To conclude, I would like to highlight the need for young people to learn some key general skills as an essential minimum to be able to adapt to very dynamic models of knowledge acquisition. This, of course, represents challenges to the curricula which, I understand, will be the focus of the discussion today.

Madam President, welcome. The floor is yours.