A quick glance into the future might lead us to suggest that 2003 may be remembered for several decades as a year of war and, at the same time, for a notable strengthening of the global nature of UNESCO as a leading academic institution of the United Nations devoted to the never-ending construction of peace through education, science, culture and communication.

Meanwhile, the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century will no doubt be remembered for other paradoxes. For example, it is a period of accelerating expansion in the technical capacity of mankind to generate sufficient resources for the entire population to benefit from them, yet of increasing difficulties in creating the models of economic, political and social development for new types of social cohesion that would provide both individual liberty and collective good. It is a time of globalization and loss of identity; of acceptance of the principles of human rights and violations in unexpected places.

This edition of PROSPECTS has been envisaged against the backdrop of these socio-economic paradoxes and other educational ones.

To begin, we include different points of view on the impact of the return of the United States to UNESCO presented by two high-level researchers from that country: Stephen Heyneman and Fernando Reimers. This event is not unconnected with the danger of new wars, nor is it foreign to the search by numerous partners for alternative ideas that would increase the international influence in the decision-making process about aspects that go much further in the direction of the free circulation of goods, services and people.

Returning to the tensions, this movement has been taking place for a considerable period of time in a shifting scenario involving a complicated tension between diversity and the international nature of educational problems, concepts and solutions. The Open File prepared by Sobhi Tawil on the theme of ‘Curricular change: a global perspective’ illustrates—precisely—how in such diverse situations as Burkina Faso, Cuba, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia and Sweden we are faced with similar concepts and also problems and solutions that react to the aforementioned globalization with an educational model based on the invention of the traditional school, which became ‘a universal school’ in the twentieth
century. Reading this Open File raises questions about the likelihood or not of anticipating great expectations from the internationalization of educational structures in this diversity.

In this issue we may also read about two articles on the theme of universities that we have included in the ‘Trends’ section of our review. One of these demonstrates the reality of globalization through the liberalization of higher education in China. The contrast between the nationality of its two authors, Fanie Pretorius, Director of the Department of Primary School Teacher Education at the University of South Africa, and Yan Quing Xue, a civil servant in the Chinese Ministry of Education and a doctoral student at the University of South Africa, demonstrates that personal contacts and the construction of professional networks weave new ways of conceiving internationalization. The other trend article, written by Wolfgang Frühwald, former President of the prestigious Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for the advancement of excellence and university co-operation at the international level in Germany, describes a change in the problems facing many of the main promoters of excellence in university education in the twentieth century confronted with university reforms that seem to be strongly influenced by the vocation of globalizing knowledge as a good and playing down former traditions.

To complete this issue, the profile of the eighty-year-old Nigerian educator Aliu Babtunde Fafunwa shows how the globalizing trend interacts with the movement towards diversity through, for example, the commitment and activity carried out by numerous educators to systematize the introduction of mother-tongues as teaching languages during early childhood. While the Chinese and German university systems propose complete courses in English and incorporate market mechanisms, Nigerian boys and girls need time to learn in a wider range of local languages.

What will the position of the new UNESCO be in the face of these wide-ranging realities? Even more to the point: what will the role of the international community be, and in particular that of its leading institutions in this context, to promote the universalization of a more relevant, but newly unique, educational model, as the modern school was in its time? To lay down common standards that will define ‘one type’ of quality education that will cover the whole world? Or, on the contrary, to lay down different standards that will reflect the unequal international distribution in access to the goods and services necessary to lead a good quality life? To lay increasing stress on the need to understand reality and appropriate action, in contrast to standardized efforts, with the exception of those concerned with the promotion of universal values through education? However, if we do not define what diversity is, will it be able to resist the pressure of commercial and linguistic globalization?
And as has been the case in other contexts, should the international community, through the agency of the United Nations and its leading institution in the field of education, establish the right of non-interference when the right to education is not guaranteed?

The new trends place the international community with more, greater and more complicated educational challenges. To confront them is not an easy task, but it is an extremely exciting one.

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