

**IAU International Conference 2009 on:  
The Role of Higher Education in Fostering the Culture of Dialogue and  
Understanding**

**Inaugural Ceremony**

*Notre Dame University – Louaizé, Lebanon*

*Wednesday 4 November 2009*

*Welcome and Opening Address, by Prof. Dr. Juan Ramon de La Fuente, President,  
International Association of Universities*

*His Excellency Mr. Tarek Mitry, Minister of Information and Culture, Lebanon*

*Rev. Walid Moussa, President, Notre Dame University – Louaize, Lebanon*

*Colleagues and Friends,*

This is the first time in over 6 decades, since it was founded, that the International Association of Universities has held a conference in Lebanon, and we, the IAU Administrative Board, the Members of the IAU Executive Committee, and the IAU Secretariat are very pleased to be here. We are here to foster the culture of dialogue and understanding; we are here to discuss what universities and Higher Education Institutions must do in this regard, in addition to what they may have done in the past already.

The IAU is here as an international representative of the universities of the world – close to 60 institutions are represented here from some 37 different countries – and as such, we believe that a tolerant and respectful dialogue is unavoidable and necessary for the recognition of difference and multiplicity in the world in which we live. We are here not only because one of our Board members, the President of NDU, has invited us generously, but because he also believes, as we all do, that universities world-wide have an important role to play in intercultural dialogue, as a premise to better understand and learn from those who do not see the world in the same way as we do.

We are here to try to make of this conference a window and a mirror to overcome our cultural ignorance; we are here not only to debate but to listen; we are here to foster the emancipating powers of cultural diversity and to learn how to use them more effectively in our responsibilities as educators and researchers. Those are some of the reasons why we are indeed pleased to be here, and to organise this conference jointly with NDU; we are also grateful for your hospitality. We acknowledge your willingness to openly interact and explore the different thought-processes through which the world is perceived and understood.

As the world moves closer together, a vital skill for nations, communities and individuals will be the ability to deal positively with *otherness*. In this context, cross-cultural education represents one of the best options for the future of societies. The internationalisation of higher education cannot be understood without this cross-cultural component. It is not just a matter of having more foreign students or having more foreign faculty. That will help, but it will not be enough. It is a matter of understanding and

acceptance of each other, and that is where education comes in. That is where dialogue, tolerance and democracy come in.

And as our world becomes ever more globalized and knowledge-based, education and science themselves have also become more knowledge-intensive. It does not require great elucidation: more and more knowledge will be produced – it has been estimated that the amount of knowledge doubles in less than every five years – and the average levels of education are rising; not with equity, not with even quality, but they are rising.

And while the whole concept of education is shifting as a result of this knowledge growth, the main aim of education as well as science is to contribute to the next generation of locally-rooted, well-informed global citizens capable of jointly ensuring peace, progress, freedom, and democracy. We are therefore increasingly confronted with questions about the direction which education and science must take on a number of crucial issues, and one of them is cultural diversity.

In our diverse and interconnected world we now have many neighbours – nearby and faraway, neighbours that come from very diverse backgrounds. It is thus essential to increase and improve knowledge, information and understanding about other people, other cultures, and other societies. And to achieve this one must be prepared to engage actively in dialogue; unconditionally and with a truly open mind. And that is why we are here – not to win a debate but to try to understand the other by listening carefully, and to do so, it will be necessary at times to remain silent as well.

Colleagues and friends, this conference is a platform for dialogue. Let us make of it a window and a mirror as well, to see others and ourselves as we are: diverse; but not to forget, nonetheless, that we are still more human than otherwise.

I wish you a very successful conference. Congratulations to NDU.