

ADG/ED's speech at the Inaugural Ceremony of IAU's 13th General Conference

“Higher Education and Research Addressing Local and Global Needs”

Utrecht, the Netherlands, 15-18 July 2008

Utrecht, 15 July 2008,

Mr Giesberts, Deputy Mayor of Utrecht,

Mr Stoof, Rector of Utrecht University,

Ms van Rooy, President of Utrecht University,

Mr van Ginkel, Former Rector of UNU and Utrecht University, Former President of International Association of Universities, and Chair of the Programme Committee

Mr Mohamedbhai, President of the International Association of Universities,

Ms Egron Polak, Secretary-General of the International Association of Universities,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me join our distinguished hosts in welcoming you in Utrecht, where the foundations of the International Association of Universities were laid in August 1948, at the Preparatory Conference of University Representatives called by UNESCO.

Sixty years later, we are again in Utrecht to celebrate the International Association of Universities and its accomplishments. These are numerous and significant. Many of them testify to the very special relationship between UNESCO and the IAU. All of them document the vital role of higher education as a key factor for social, economic and cultural development, as an endogenous capacity-builder, as a promoter of human rights, sustainable development, democracy, peace and justice.

Created in the aftermath of World War II to foster international university cooperation, the International Association of Universities has since served as a global platform for universities and, more recently, other higher education institutions, to meet and debate on their missions and functions, to take stock of changes influencing their development, to strengthen cooperation and share good practices.

However, the celebration of the IAU anniversary is not the only reason that has brought us all in Utrecht for the Association's 13th General Conference. The Association will elect a new President and Administrative Board and will discuss its programme for 2008-2012. The latter will no doubt be guided by the outcomes of this IAU Thematic Conference “Higher Education and Research Addressing Local and Global Needs”.

In its sixty years of existence, the IAU has witnessed the significant changes that are shaping higher education as well as the increasing pressure placed on higher education systems and

institutions to change so that they meet national development objectives and individual aspirations. This pressure has probably never been as great as today.

Higher education institutions retain their mission to educate, to train, to undertake research and to serve their communities but are asked to do so in a rapidly changing environment. Institutions have to diversify to respond to changing societal needs, and above all to new learners, for lifelong learning has become one of the key elements of the process towards building knowledge economies.

Higher education institutions are asked to equip increasing numbers of learners with the knowledge, skills and critical thinking that will ensure their employability and respond to national sustainable development objectives.

Higher education institutions are expected to continue to advance, create and disseminate knowledge through research and to provide relevant expertise to assist societal development.

HEIs and systems must be innovative in identifying alternative sources of funding for public funds can no longer fully support their functioning and development to increase efficiency and maintain quality and relevance.

A very tall order – although I mentioned only some of the challenges that higher education institutions are facing – which attests to the vital contribution of higher education and its institutions to sustainable national development.

UNESCO's key mission is related to education – to achieve the goals of Education for All – based on the assumption that education is central to development and higher education has been part of our EFA mission since the very beginning. 60 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, even the right to a basic education is denied to 10 % of the world's first school age children. However, within our focus on EFA we are realising that there are new political realities not yet recognized by EFA to be kept in mind for future action, both at a global level and by national governments – the growing demand for higher education, being one. Indeed, it is increasingly perceived that higher education is strategic for all education, in both its teaching and its research functions. This in turn has incidence on work of governments at national level: sustainable development (perceived more broadly than environmental protection), gender equality (distance education's role in reaching women and girls); regulation of private provision at all levels; cross-border higher education; the crucial role of quality and quality assurance; and teacher training on a vast scale.

The issues that this IAU thematic conference will address preoccupy the academic community worldwide. The outcomes of your deliberations will no doubt document the need for strong support for the design and implementation of sound policies in higher education; for building human and institutional capacity; and for the establishment of knowledge sharing networks. They will provide a valuable input to the world conference on higher education that UNESCO will be hosting in July 2009, a year from now.

The 2009 World Conference will focus on “The new dynamics of higher education for societal change and development”. It will take stock of changes in higher education since the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education, and will address the new dynamics that are likely to shape the strategic agenda for the development of higher education policies and institutions in the foreseeable future. A round table on African higher education is being organized in cooperation with the Association for the Development of Education in Africa.

In preparation of this important event, a series of regional conferences are being organized to bring specific concerns, expectations and proposals to the global event: two sub-regional conferences for Asia and the Pacific, to be held in Macao, China in September 2008, and in India in March 2009; the regional conference on higher education in Africa, to be held in November 2008 in Senegal; the conference for the Arab Region will be held in Lebanon in early 2009; and the UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in the Europe and North America Region which will be held in May 2009 in Romania.

The themes will be organized along a short number of key areas where policy making will be of particular importance such as: the mobilization of higher education for regional and global challenges; national strategies for the deployment of higher education as a public responsibility (the interface between state and higher education); ensuring that higher education institutions are responsive to social needs; and investment in higher education.

I am particularly pleased that sixty years after its creation at the initiative of UNESCO, the International Association of Universities continues to be one of our main partners in higher education. Indeed a new formal agreement between IAU and UNESCO is under preparation.

The Association is represented by its President and Secretary-General in the Committee set up by UNESCO for the preparation of the 2009 World Conference. The role of the Conference Committee – which brings together the Bureau and ex officio members of the International WCHE Follow-up Committee as well as several well-known higher education experts – is to provide advice on the design and expected outcomes of the 2009 World Conference, to assist the UNESCO Secretariat for the preparation of the conference, and to help promote the 2009 World Conference to key stakeholders in higher education.

We have much appreciated the valuable input provided so far by the IAU President, Professor Goolam Mohamedbhai, and its Secretary-General, Ms Eva Egron-Polak. We are confident that the next IAU President will be willing to pursue the long standing cooperation between the International Association of Universities and UNESCO for the benefit of higher education institutions and the broader academic community.

Thank you.

Nick Burnett,
Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO