

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a real honour and a privilege for me to welcome you at the 13<sup>th</sup> General Conference of the International Association of Universities. Of course, a special welcome to the President of the Conference, Goolam Mohamedbhai, to the Coordinator of the Network of tertiary education professionals of the World Bank, Jamil Salmi, to the Assistant Director-General for Education of UNESCO, Nick Burnett and to the Secretary-General of the Association of African Universities, Akilagpa Sawyerr. And, last, but not least, Robert Giesberts, loco mayor of the city of Utrecht. Fortunately, I can see that quite a number of other prestigious guests have found their way to Utrecht. If I am well informed you are coming from more than 120 different countries and I really hope that it has been also your experience so far that Utrecht, although small, is a wonderful city.

*Utrecht is also a city with an intriguing history. Just a couple of historical facts for your information:*

At the beginning of the Christian era, the Romans dominated extensive parts of Europe and the river Rhine had become the northern border of their empire. The Roman Emperor Claudius commissioned to set up a line of fortresses along the Rhine in 47 A.D. One of these fortresses or 'castella' was called 'Traiectum', which means 'crossing'. In the local language this developed into Utrecht and this castella became the origin of our city. This castella was located, just here, where we are now sitting. You're on historical grounds.

You should also know that Utrecht played an important role in the founding of the Netherlands. In 1579 the treaty of the so called Union of Utrecht, actually the constitution of the modern Kingdom of the Netherlands, was signed in the auditorium of our Academy Building. It is worth noting that this is the location where the reception, right after this welcome address, will be given.

*Utrecht University is an important and well-known university for a number of reasons. I would like to give you just some of them:*

- Utrecht University was founded in 1636 and the number of students has grown to over 29.000 students right now, which makes our university the largest university in the Netherlands. I will come back to that later.
- Utrecht University offers the broadest spectrum of disciplines available in the Netherlands, offers innovative research, almost 250 teaching programs (48 for bachelor and almost 200 for master programs) and collaborates with universities and research centres all over the world.
- The university counts 11 Nobel laureates among its current and former students and staff. The most recent ones are Gerard't Hooft en Marty Veltman. They received the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1999.
- It holds a 7th position on the European Shanghai-ranking. World-wide Utrecht University holds position nr. 41 out of more than 2.000 universities and is for that reason called a world-class university. However, we all know the relative value of these ranking lists and for more reading on that issue I would like to refer to the March issue of this year's IAU *Higher Education Policy*, where Jeroen Huisman puts everything in the appropriate perspective.

*Let me now concentrate more on the essentials of this conference.*

Most of you, if not all, are well aware of the fact that one of the reasons that this conference is hosted by Utrecht University, is that 60 years ago the Preparatory Conference for what later would become the IAU, was also hosted here in Utrecht. I have had the opportunity to preview the booklet with the title “Work with Universities” that professor Dorsman will present to you on Thursday night and I was struck by a couple of facts. First of all, at one of the first pages of this booklet, he presented a copy of the first page of the special issue of the local newspaper, called Utrechts Nieuwsblad, which appeared on August 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1948. This issue of the newspaper was presented partly in English and in French and I can assure you that that has been really exceptional for this local newspaper. The reason was of course the hosting of the Preparatory Conference by the city of Utrecht and Utrecht University together on initiative of the UNESCO and the Dutch government.

Another fact that struck me by trying to read that copy of the newspaper, and I can assure you to decipher the text of this copy you really need good eyes, was one of the statements made by the assistant Director-General of UNESCO, who also attended that Preparatory Conference. He stated that one of the main problems of that time (which was 1948) was that universities became overcrowded. Just imagine that our university had at that time only 4.000 students, as compared to almost 30.000 students right now. I am convinced that we are not the only university in this world that has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of students over the past 60 years. So, what do you mean by “overcrowded”?

*That brings me to the goals of IAU and of this conference*

As far as I have seen the goals of the IAU are still as they have been formulated in 1948. IAU will and has to continue its tradition of promoting the ideal of Universities and other Higher Education Institutes as guardians of intellectual life and intellectual freedom. In addition Universities should be conscious of their responsibilities and obligations to our society. Taking into consideration the mission of IAU, I think we must be very glad that increasing numbers of students all over the world and from all layers of our society find their way to Universities and Higher Education Institutes. Thus, the more students we can teach these goals and principles, the better it will be not only for them but for our society as a whole.

*The topic of the 13th conference is: ‘Higher Education and Research, Addressing Local and Global Needs’.*

As I said in the beginning, as a rector of this university, I am very honoured that you, as a group of prestigious policy makers, university board members and scholars came from so many countries all the way to Utrecht. Hopefully you will be able the next couple of days to exchange your ideas and concepts with each other in a very fruitful way. I really hope that this Conference will contribute to formulate answers on questions such as: are HEI’s contributing to the promotion of social justice, peace and equity? Or are HEI’s exercising their responsibilities that come with the role they have to play in scientific discoveries and its applications? Or, are HEI leaders sufficiently engaged as moral leaders, building public trust in order to realize sufficient public funding for higher education and research?

It is my conviction that, finding answers to these questions, will be to the benefit not only of universities in particular but also to our society in general.

Then there is still one point I would like to make. If time allows, don't forget to have a couple drinks on one of the marvellous terraces in the centre of our city the next couple of days. It is not only good for our economy but also for your feelings of well being. On behalf of Utrecht University, I wish you an inspiring and challenging conference.

J.C. Stoof, Rector, Utrecht University, The Netherlands