Introduction to the Theme: Internationalization, Regionalization, and Globalization

[Greetings]

A. Reflections

I am delighted to be with you today to introduce the theme of the first parallel workshop of the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education:

Internationalization, Regionalization and Globalization

Since the first World Conference on Higher Education just over a decade ago, these three issues have grown considerably in importance. Today, the associated literature constitutes countless volumes of published analysis and commentary. UNESCO, the OECD, the World Bank, the Commonwealth of Learning and the United Nations University are but a few of the many organizations worldwide that have labored to assess these three issues and their implications for higher education. While we must acknowledge the considerable efforts that have been put into (i) defining these phenomena, (ii) understanding their relationship to education, and (iii) assessing their impact on education, we must also accept that they continue to evoke different meanings for different stakeholders. In this respect, the online forum that preceded this conference succeeded in highlighting not only the importance of these themes but also the great diversity in opinions and expectations among stakeholders.

Eleven years later, higher education institutions around the world are continuing to labor to overcome the challenges highlighted here in 1998. They continue to seek solutions to problems of sustainable financing. Barriers to access, equity and equality of educational opportunity are an enduring reality for still too many students. Cohesive quality assurance frameworks governing transnational education are still wanting. Furthermore, with the growth of global private education providers, the potential for incongruity between instructional methods and community needs has in fact, grown. The solutions to these problems remain elusive. Recent scholarship has shown that internationalization,
regionalization and globalization can be platforms for innovative solutions to many of these challenges, but may also exacerbate existing tensions.

From the highest circles of policy-making to the modern-day classroom, administrators, students, and decision-makers are making their voices heard on these issues. So, on this important occasion, I would like to add my voice and bring some clarity to this rich discussion by addressing these phenomena in light of the recent commercialization trends in higher education. Rather than focusing on the narrow definition of these themes, I would like to adopt a more holistic approach to the international, regional and global dimensions of higher education. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the important work of our colleagues who will participate in the workshops of the coming days.

I offer my observations as the Rector of an institution which has a unique mandate for global research, teaching and capacity development. With an established presence in 13 countries and research partnerships in 11 more, the United Nations University has the privilege of drawing on a truly global knowledge network. While still a relatively new field of research in higher education, cross-border education has been a reality for the UNU since its establishment in 1973.

For 36 years the United Nations University has been a model of sustainable and equitable knowledge production on a global scale. Every academic contribution is evidence that cross-border partnerships for research, teaching and capacity development “can transcend mere economic considerations and incorporate deeper dimensions of morality.”

On the eve of the twenty-first century, the World Declaration on Higher Education called upon the world’s governments and decision-makers to address the profound crisis of values in higher education. Our work is not done; the crisis does continue; and we must mobilize to ensure education remains the inviolable wellspring of human knowledge and progress.


In his early writings the American educationalist John Dewey remarked that “we do not learn from experience;” rather, “we learn from reflection on experience.” To hold a belief as fact despite opposing evidence is an exercise in dogmatic thinking that we, the participants of this World Conference on Higher Education, cannot afford. Before suggesting a way forward then, let me first reflect on some of the important developments in higher education over the past decade.

[i] Student Mobility

Driving many of the changes in higher education is an unprecedented rise in ‘internationally mobile students’. It is worth noting that UNESCO’s main statistical agencies introduced this term in their yearly reporting a mere three years ago: a sign of evolving institutional responses to the internationalization of student bodies.

In the five years following the first World Conference, the number of students studying outside their home countries jumped by 41 percent, to include some 2.5 million students. In

3 This is a term used by UNESCO and others.
5 Refers to the period 1999-2004.
this same period, worldwide enrolments in tertiary education grew by 43 percent, to a record high of 132 million students.\textsuperscript{6,7} It is estimated that by 2025, the global demand for international higher education will grow to 7.6 million students.\textsuperscript{8} Despite this growth, it is still too early to conclude that our classrooms are becoming microcosms of the global community, as internationally mobile students are not evenly distributed throughout the world.

In fact, another look at these statistics reveals some sobering truths.

As of 2006, just six countries hosted 67 percent of the world’s mobile students. Consider as well that Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest ratio of outwardly mobile students in the world, with 1 in every 16 students studying abroad. More recent findings suggest that one third of all African scientists live and work in developed countries and that most will never return to their home country.\textsuperscript{9}

Our work at this important gathering and the decisions we make must reflect a thorough consideration of these facts.

[ii] GATS and the Commodification of Education

The contemporary dynamics of higher education have given rise to new pedagogical industries throughout the world. Educational institutions with long histories have also been obliged to adapt to new global, regional and national realities.

In his eighteenth century work, ‘Cinq memoires sur l’instruction publique’, Nicolas de Condorcet, the French enlightenment philosopher and mathematician to whom we owe many seminal works on human progress, cautioned:

\begin{quote}
Une nation qui se gouvernerait toujours par les mêmes maximes, et que ses institutions ne disposeraient point à se plier aux changements, suite nécessaire des révolutions amenées par le temps, verrait naître sa ruine des mêmes opinions, des mêmes moyens qui avaient assuré sa prospérité. (….) Comme l’individu obligé de s’écarter du lieu qui l’a vu naître a besoin d’acquérir plus d’idées que celui qui y reste attaché, et doit, à mesure qu’il s’en éloigne, se ménager de nouvelles ressources, de même les nations qui s’avancent à travers les siècles ont besoin d’une instruction qui, se renouvelant et se corrigeant sans cesse, suive la marche du temps, la prévienne quelquefois, et ne la contrarie jamais.\textsuperscript{10, 11}
\end{quote}

On more than one occasion new realities have forced a reexamination of the basic tenets of higher education. We must, as Condorcet suggests, ensure that our social institutions remain

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\item[7] If information is lacking on some tertiary education providers, the actual volume of educational provision may be underestimated. The opposite can also be true in countries with large numbers of part-time tertiary students who are not reported as such and are, therefore, counted as full-time students. It is preferable to compare enrolment based on full-time equivalence, but the data presented here do not distinguish between types of students. Cited from: UNESCO. (2006). \textit{Global Education Digest 2006}. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
\item[11] Partial and unofficial translation: A nation which would be at all times governed by the same maxims, whose institutions would remain resistant to change – the necessary consequence of time’s revolutions – would bear witness to its ruin from the same opinions and means that once ensured its prosperity.
\end{itemize}
flexible enough to negotiate the changing landscapes that will challenge their core functions over time. How then, are our institutions of higher education to deal with the changing landscape of the twenty-first century?

The laissez-faire policies that have shaped market forces since the Second World War, offer no special guarantees to safeguard critical thinking, creativity and moral development. And if there were a time when higher education institutions could claim refuge from the rigors of the market, clearly that time has come to an end.

The global trade regimes that agitate for the progressive liberalization of goods and services caught many in the education sector unprepared to negotiate the future of higher education. In the beginning, education specialists were simply excluded from the negotiating table. And for some time, the future of education was considered to be in the hands of those least familiar with its value as a public good.

For some, the inclusion of education services in the General Agreement on Trade in Services, marked a critical repositioning of education: it became a global commodity to be sold, consumed, and traded.

Opposition to this way of thinking has been forceful and widespread.

In the past decade, the major university associations in Africa, North America and Europe, as well as civil society actors, have issued numerous declarations opposing the inclusion of education services in the GATS. These call attention to the ambiguities, silences and lack of clarity in GATS provisions. Furthermore, these declarations emphasize the need to adopt effective and responsible consultation practices between trade officials and the organizations representing public and private higher education institutions.

And other risks continue to be of great concern to administrators, practitioners and beneficiaries of higher education. The unrelenting commodification of education may, as many have pointed out, encourage cross-sectoral trading; in essence, bartering concessions in goods and services against the latent genius of future generations. If foreign service providers are allowed to engage in ‘educational dumping’, the chase for a ‘brand name’ education may compromise the ability of national education systems to attract able and talented students.

Still in other instances, governments have embraced it as a means to provide greater access to tertiary education where national capacity to provide this training is insufficient. More importantly, we should recall that the GATS remains an untested agreement, with consequences we cannot yet fully appreciate. While the multilateral trading system is negotiating a period of prolonged difficulties, countries are turning to other fora to achieve their trade objectives. I urge the specialists gathered here today, to carefully scrutinize trade agreements in all fora, that seek to undermine the public and moral character of education. The positive outcomes of this consultation process must begin with your governments and their trade representatives. I hope these successes can then inform the global multilateral trade forum.

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C. The Role of the University in the 21st Century

In his opening remarks on the occasion of the 11th General Conference of the Association of African Universities in 2005, former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, hailed education practitioners as the architects of the new African world. He made a forceful appeal for greater collaboration among all stakeholders, in order to make knowledge relevant to the needs of the continent, and for universities to synchronize their roles with future African development and peace.

[i] Realms of Progress: economic, polity, culture

The issue of synchronization is indeed an important one. In 1976, Daniel Bell proposed an analytical model of society, divided into three realms: the techo-economic structure, the polity, and the culture. If I may, I would like to quote directly from Daniel Bell here:

These are not congruent with one another and have different rhythms of change; they follow different norms which legitimate different, and even contrasting, types of behavior. It is the discordances between these realms which are responsible for the various contradictions within society.  

Bell concludes that markets, cultural mores and political structures each evolve at a unique cadence. If the decisions taken by world leaders are to be sustainable, and their impact meaningful, they too must respect the relative autonomy and pace of each realm. This notion has implications for at least two recent trends in higher education: the commercialization of education and the harmonization of regional education systems.

There are clear differences in education system structures, societal values, pedagogical objectives, languages, and even school calendars, in regions throughout the world. However, in the last decade or so, the trend has been to strive for harmonization of education systems and thus, overcome some of these differences. To be successful, regional mechanisms aimed at promoting the greater harmonization of education systems must take into account and respect the different pace of change in economic, political and social realms; search for common points of linkage; and exploit them for the benefit of all stakeholders. The alternative, forcing cultural institutions to move at the market pace, will inevitably lead to discord. What architect would seek to deny the unique properties of his building blocks?

As architects in our own right, how much have we done to ensure that education, the building block of democracies, renews the vitality of inquiring minds?

[ii] Reorienting Priorities in Higher Education

Higher education in the twenty-first century must evolve in fundamental ways. It is not enough to argue the line of a ‘public good’ deserving of special recognition and privileges. If higher education it is to remain a valued and relevant social institution it must innovate on a scale and speed exceeding that of global markets. The current economic crisis is a case in point: institutions of higher education should be innovating world markets, not seek isolation from them. If given the financial and political latitude to set its own priorities, higher education will likely prove to be a more dynamic and sustainable force for global change. Like the current economic crisis, several other global crises could benefit from a revitalized approach to higher education.

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On the other hand, higher education institutions must embrace this change and make a leap in global leadership to ensure they remain at the forefront of human progress, not peripheral institutions reacting to the whims of the market.

Education will continue to represent that crucial element that regulates the good governance of peoples, the functioning of the state, and the survival and spread of culture. Above all else, education will enable us to deal with the real, grave and pressing challenges knocking on our door. Yes, education systems must be internationalized, so as to enable people to think in global dimensions.

While governments may have vested interests in seeing other aspects of the nation grow and flourish, they have an enormous responsibility to ensure the relevant and timely education of their people. There is no question: by shaping education, you shape the future of your nation and the future of the globe.

D. The United Nations University: Rescaling education

In defining the three terms that make-up the theme of this session, many have noted that education has been rescaled to a global level. Faster, more reliable and more widespread information communication networks are bringing global pressures to bear on nations. In these circumstances, internationalization is understood as a response to the pressures of globalization.

The United Nations University, for its part, has approached this paradigm somewhat differently. Fundamentally a global institution, it reaches from the global to the local; seeking not to internationalize its research, but to strengthen its local roots by combining local and global aspects in research and teaching.

In ‘Democracy and Education’, Dewey writes,

> We sometimes talk as if ‘original research’ were a peculiar prerogative of scientists or at least of advanced students. But all thinking is research, and all research is native, original, with him who carries it on, even if everybody else in the world already is sure of what he is still looking for.16

In order to bring more native, local and original knowledge to the surface in a global pool of ideas, the United Nations University has embarked on an ambitious mission to twin all of its research Institutes in developed countries with partners in developing countries. Research will focus on the problems that affect developing and transitional countries, as a means to enhance capacity for human and social development.

The United Nations University will continue to expand its international community of scholars in order to promote development, sustainability and peace. I look forward to the discussions at this second World Conference on Higher Education, and trust they will culminate in a concrete action plan that will endorse these noble aims.

I wish you all fruitful and productive discussions.

Thank you.

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