Opening Remarks

by Rector Hans van Ginkel

Your Royal Highness, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn,
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General, UNESCO
Your Excellency, Akiko Yamanaka, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, Member of the House of Representatives, Japan
Masayoshi Yoshino, Vice Minister, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great honor and pleasure to welcome you all to the UNU/UNESCO Conference on Globalization: Challenges and Opportunities for Science and technology.

I would like to start his remarks by saying that “Good Cooperation is Visible in Small Things”. However, in an increasingly competitive and globalized world, cooperation is not always easy. Nevertheless, where the effort is made, it can lead to great success — as evidenced by major breakthroughs in modern science. Whether the success is big or small, however, cooperation will always be visible in (many) small things.

Such good cooperation has been growing over recent years between UNESCO and United Nations University (UNU), based on the complementarity of our missions as well as on good relations and respect for the contributions of our
diverse expertise. This cooperation is intensive in areas as distinct as access and
benefit sharing of deep-seabed genetic resources; strategies to prevent deserts
from expanding, or to expand and improve agriculture in marginal drylands; the
protection of mangrove forests in Asia and the Pacific; improvement of the
quality of life and prevention of land degradation in the mountains of Central
Asia; the prevention and proper management of floods, landslides, and other
disasters; and education for sustainable development.

Good cooperation becomes visible in seemingly small things. To facilitate such
cooperation, UNUESCO Director-General Matsuura and I have established an
exchange program that enables one researcher from each organization to work at
the other each year, for some weeks or even months, on a project of mutual
interest. In this way, we can learn effectively about what is being done and
planned in both organizations, and thus ensure optimal preparation and
implementation of all projects that have our shared interest. A number of Japanese
universities are also involved in this cooperation, including some in the Kanto
Region and in Kyoto, Tottori, Hokkaido and Okinawa.

One example of the consistent cooperation between UNESCO and UNU is a
series of annual conferences, begun in 2001, that deal with the challenges and
opportunities posed by globalization. The shrinking of distances and the opening
up of markets and borders have inevitably had a great impact in many sectors of
our daily life. To understand this impact and help ensure that globalization
benefits all, these conferences have addressed several critical issues, including the
hidden dimensions of globalization (such as those relating to social, cultural, and
religious life); dialogue among civilizations; intangible cultural heritage, like
music, dance and literature; or education for sustainable development for all, both
inside and outside schools.
This year’s conference focuses on the interlinkages between globalization and science and technology. While globalization processes are, in part, driven by science and technology — particularly, new information and communication technologies — globalization in turn has strongly influenced the ways in which scientific knowledge and new technologies are produced and disseminated. The impact of globalization has been largely positive, offering new opportunities to promote social and economic development for the benefit of all. In some of the developed countries, in particular, science and technology are developing with breathtaking speed.

Knowledge is becoming an ever-more important strategic advantage for a seemingly decreasing number of countries. To prevent the race to the top from leaving more and more people behind, in both developed and developing countries, the sharing of knowledge, making use of all the communication tools we have at our disposal, is becoming crucial. Only through such sharing can globalization and the progress of science and technology be made to benefit all in, for example, human (including economic) development, health care, environmental issues, disaster preparedness, and the safe and dependable provision of water and energy.

Yet globalization has also created new challenges and policy questions that cannot be ignored. Increasingly, ethical questions have emerged in the international debates on such topics as bio-diversity, genetic research, cloning, or stem cell research. There are also questions of intellectual property rights and knowledge sharing. The uneven distribution of an increasingly important production factor — knowledge — may now be the ultimate difference between economically successful and less successful (even failing) countries, and between rich and poor. And increasingly, given that the development of knowledge is so expensive,
doubts are being expressed about capacities to continue to contribute to the next stage.

Knowledge transfer has, therefore, become a top issue in all trade negotiations. I am reminded of a remark made by one of my mentors, Prof. Walter Kamba from Zimbabwe, former chairperson of the UNU Council: “Do you think that knowledge is expensive? Try the opposite!”

It is therefore vital, I believe, to explore further the relations between globalization and the development of science and technology and, in particular, to understand and strengthen the role of science and technology anywhere so as to improve the human condition everywhere; to improve all the issues that matter to every person: food, water, shelter, health, environment. These are the issues on which we, in UNESCO and UNU, focus. It is in many small things that good cooperation becomes visible; through people cooperating in projects, sharing their thoughts and knowledge. People building the common future of humankind through creative, innovative science and technology has proven to be capable of making highly valuable contributions. This will be the focus of the discussions in this year’s conference.

Finally, I would like to thank all of you for coming here today and for participating in this two-days conference. I wish you will find the issues addressed in this year’s conference stimulating and educational.

Thank you very much.

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