Address by Mr Koichi Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the UNU/UNESCO International Conference
on Globalization “Pathways towards a shared future:
Changing roles of higher education in a globalized world

UN House, Tokyo, 29 August 2007

Excellencies,
Mr Rector,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you today to the annual UNU/UNESCO International Conference on Globalization. This year’s event will focus on the theme: “Pathways towards a shared future: changing roles of higher education in a globalized world”.

I wish to begin by welcoming the many distinguished participants, who have travelled from near and far to be with us here in Tokyo. They demonstrate by their presence the growing importance of these meetings, whose overarching aim is to assess the impact of globalization on our societies, to identify where action is most needed, and to ensure that globalization serves human interests and is of benefit to all.

I would like to thank the Government of Japan, and especially XXX, for their support to this event.

Above all, I wish to express my gratitude to those who helped to organize today’s Conference, and especially to UNU Rector, Professor Hans van Ginkel.

As Mr van Ginkel is now retiring from his post, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to his dynamic and sterling leadership. For ten years, he has directed
this University with remarkable professionalism, outstanding dedication, and inspiring vision. I personally appreciate deeply what he has done to enhance the longstanding cooperation between UNU and UNESCO; there now exist a real spirit of dialogue and shared understanding between our two organizations, as demonstrated by today’s Conference.

Let me also seize this occasion to congratulate Professor Konrad Osterwalder, who will be taking over at the helm of UNU. I greatly look forward to working with you and to strengthening our collaboration yet further.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The relation between globalization and higher education is complex and dynamic.

It is clear that the forces of globalization are transforming the nature and function of higher education. At the same time, higher education is driving globalization, as it transcends borders and cultures in the pursuit of knowledge and the free exchange of ideas. Higher education also empowers young people to participate in and help shape the processes of globalization. It is a factor in promoting democracy, sustainable development and economic growth – a foundation for building a better future for all.

Globalization, therefore, poses both new challenges and opportunities for higher education. What are these challenges and how can the international community respond to them? Let me address some of the most salient issues.

The first is mobility. Figures demonstrate a dramatic increase in the international mobility of students, researchers and academics. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, in 1998 there were 1.5 million students studying abroad. By 2004 this figure had tripled to 2.4 million.

Students from developing countries, in particular from Africa, are the most mobile. One million people from developing countries are studying at higher education institutions in industrialized countries. An estimated 1 out of 16 students from sub-Saharan Africa study in a country other than their own.
Such increased mobility creates many positive new opportunities – especially in terms of fostering greater intercultural dialogue and international cooperation.

However, it can also constitute an enormous loss for countries in terms of development. UNESCO and UNU are working hard to mitigate the negative impacts of the brain drain, in particular through capacity-building programmes and the promotion of intellectual collaboration, knowledge exchange and networking. Strengthening North-South, South-South and triangular North-South-South cooperation is a central aspect of this work.

But mobility also poses other challenges, beyond that of brain drain. One key issue is the portability and recognition of higher education qualifications. In this regard, UNESCO is revising its regional conventions on the recognition of academic qualifications to ensure that they respond to changing learner needs. The aim is to ensure coherence, while still recognizing the diversity of peoples and the specific character of their education systems.

A second issue is the massive increase in student population. In 2004, there were 132 million students – including part time students – enrolled in tertiary education globally, up from 68 million in 1991.

Demographic pressures make such expansion particularly marked in developing countries. Estimates foresee a population of 8 billion in developing countries by 2020, of which 50% will be young people in search of educational opportunities.

How to meet this demand? How to expand access while at the same time ensuring quality?

This leads me to my third point: the emergence of new forms of higher education provision.

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is expanding rapidly, and can play a vital role in increasing access to education, especially in developing countries. At a time when state budgets for higher education are decreasing, ICTs provide a cost effective means of delivery. In a technological era, virtual and e-learning can also create an education experience that is more responsive to learner needs and aspirations.
However, the use of ICTs does bring new kinds of problems, such as those regarding content, intellectual property, and linguistic diversity. These challenges must be navigated carefully if we are to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks.

Another trend is the rise in private higher education, as the fastest growing segment of higher education worldwide. The greatest expansion can be seen in Latin America and Asia, but steady growth is also taking place in Africa as well.

This commercialization of higher education, alongside the trend towards the liberalization of trade in educational services, places renewed focus on the ethical challenges facing higher education in an era of globalization.

UNESCO has been actively assisting governments and academic leaders in their response to these issues. In particular, we have jointly developed with OECD “Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education”. Launched at the end of 2005, the Guidelines provide an international framework to promote dialogue and international co-operation between providers and receivers of higher education, with a special focus on student protection.

My fourth point relates to the unprecedented emphasis being placed on research within higher education and its contribution to national development.

This "research revolution" has important consequences for the relationship between the university and government, industry and private-sector research centres, raising important questions about academic autonomy.

Another challenge is the deepening of inequalities between developed and developing countries. A profound "research divide" already exists, and will become more marked if concerted efforts are not made to strengthen capacity in the South. Those countries – like Brazil, China and India – that have established effective innovation systems have seen the rewards. Yet elsewhere, in particular in Africa, stronger national commitment – and greater international support – is needed. Toward this end, UNESCO is working closely with the African Union to establish centres of excellence as catalysts for strengthening research capacity across the continent.
My fifth and final point regards gender equality. There is a pressing need to enhance education opportunities for women, especially in developing countries. Gender disparities in higher education tend to be much deeper than at the lower levels, acting as a break on women’s empowerment and equal participation in society. Overcoming the obstacles to women’s access to higher education is a priority for UNESCO, as part of our commitment to achieving gender equality in all spheres of life.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Together, we must explore the challenges and opportunities for higher education in a globalized world. We must look at the range of issues that face us today, from those of access, equity and quality, to how to strengthen higher education and research institutions so that they can better contribute to the development of our societies. And together, we must work to find the answers, in order to ensure that globalization works for the benefit of all.

I am convinced that this conference will offer valuable guidance to the international community on the way forward. The outcomes of this event will provide input into the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, as well as the ongoing work of the UNESCO Forum for Higher Education, Research and Knowledge.

I therefore look forward to dynamic, constructive and forward-looking conclusions.

I thank you for your attention and wish you a successful Conference.